Giant western

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

HIGH DESERT

A Full-Length Novel

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

THE FUR TRAPPERS

A Frontier Novelet by TOM W. BLACKBURN

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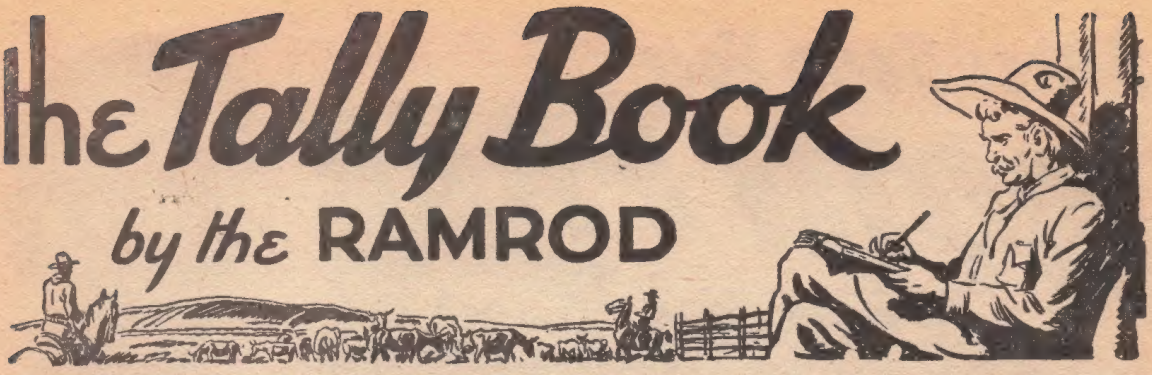
The Tally Book

by the RAMROD



A DEPARTMENT WHERE ALL HANDS GET TOGETHER TO RIDE HERD ON THE WESTERN FICTION ROUNDUP

SOMETIMES a man, no matter how honest and able he may be, gets caught in a pattern of events and human emotions that force his hand at every turn. That's what happens to Jim Cantrell in the complete book-length novel, GUNFIGHTER, which forms the backbone of the coming number of GIANT WESTERN. GUNFIGHTER, in addition to being an action novel of the first grade, is the saga of a man's battle against his own hate.

But Jim Cantrell, ex-marshal of turbulent trail towns, is just the man to buck such a situation. As old Kentucky Tom Lieber, owner of the Big L ranch, says of him, "He's young enough to have his full strength and old enough to know how to use it." But for all his vigorous good sense, Cantrell is no cold and calculating piece of clockwork; he is a warm and living human being, as rash and reckless when aroused as a fighting grizzly.

With his wild young brother, Bill, he had gone homesteading with the hope of steadying the lad. For Bill both drank and fought too much. The day their log house was finished Jim had hung his Walker model Colt up on a peg as an example to his brother, and as a further example he had quit drinking altogether. For two long years that gun never left the peg, until the day Sheriff Fiske comes out with the news that Bill has been shot to death in a saloon by a drifter named Rebel John.

Cantrell Heads South

That evening, after the burial, Jim Cantrell takes down the Colt from its lonesome peg and heads south on the trail of the killer, bearing a hard core of hatred that he believes can be resolved only by another death. He rides into Border Basin and trouble.

There Jim loses the trail. And there young John Lieber saves his life, and in gratitude he feels obligated to enmesh himself in the snarled skeins of the hidden plot that is riding the valley ranchers ragged without their being able to put their finger on its cause.

In Border Basin, Jim meets Horseshoe Bastable, the tall handsome gambler and rancher who always wears a horseshoe pin in his black cravat, and is a rising power in the country—and Kentucky Tom Lieber, the hawk-beaked rangeland aristocrat, who wears a goatee and always has a slender cheroot in his mouth. And there he meets Tom Lieber's sorrel-topped daughter, "whose low, rich voice was like the soft toned bells of El Fidel across the darkness."

And there, like a promise of peace in the gathering storm of a cataclysmic range war, he meets Padre Paul of Mission El Fidel, who represents for Jim Cantrell one of the three sides of his own internal conflict.

The other two are his need to avenge his brother and his need to fight for the friend who had saved his life. For the man's fight is more with himself than with his enemy, and ever through the roaring of guns and above the imminent presence of death he hears the gentle echoes of the Padre's words:

"Pride and greed, the twin parents of trouble . . . Hate begets hate, and revenge never eases the burden of grief . . . Judge not in haste, lest ye also be judged hastily . . . You may ride to the ends of the earth, but all you'll ever find is what you bring with you—"

(Continued on page 8)

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*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by Professional models

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THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 6)

"And that," decides Jim Cantrell along toward the end of the story, "is the truth."

A Hunted Man

A hunted renegade, no more than bullet bait for either side, he is standing alone at a bar having one last drink before he takes off for the Owlhoot Hills. Then the Mission bells start tolling and he looks through the door to see that it is sundown. And there in the peace of the evening there comes to him the full force of the the truth of Padre Paul's sayings. He'd brought hatred to Border Basin. Now he is hated by many. He brought "the gnawing hunger of aloneness," and he'd found that in that also, you find only what you bring. . . .

But at this climax of Jim Cantrell's aloneness there comes a sudden gust of gunfire that starts the ending of a Western novel that needs no boosting beyond the irrepressible desire that seizes anyone who reads it to tell his friends about it. We only want to warn you, if you want an unforgettable experience, look forward to GUNFIGHTER by LESLIE ERNENWEIN!

The Medical Kid

The troubles a young doctor, fresh out of Louisiana State Medical School, can run into out west are the basis for the rollicking tale of THE MEDICAL KID, featured novelet for next issue by Steuart Emery.

Young Dr. Arch Leroy began his practice in New Mexico by being held up. The bandits took his money, his instruments and his horse, leaving him stranded, penniless and minus the tools of his trade. From this predicament he was rescued by a huge man on a wagon which bore the legend OLD DOCTOR CLUSKEY'S BENEFICIAL BALM.

Dr. Cluskey was inclined toward "his young colleague" and whatever distaste Dr. Leroy might have felt toward being associated with a quack medicine man he had little choice but to hide if he preferred riding to walking. He climbed into the wagon and rolled toward the

(Continued on page 10)

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THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 8)

town of Silvermine where trouble awaited him such as he had never expected in medical practice.

This is a breezy tale of brave doings which will keep you chuckling, yet thrilled. Mark the name of Steuart Emery, he's got some westerns coming up that are top-hands for pure entertainment.

The First Cowboy

Badger Clark, the talented cowboy poet, once wrote a poem that starts something, though far from exactly, like this:

From the time when Lot and Abram
split the Bible range in two
Beef on hoof has always caused a
battle.
If you want to see a blazing, bang-up,
double-action fight,
Just trail along with men who follow
cattle.

However that may be, there is no question that there have been boys herding cows since long before the beginnings of written history.

In America, of course, there were cow ranches way back in the early Spanish days. But generally we think of the first cowboys as the Texas men who in response to the terrific demand for beef after the Civil War, the presence of thousands of snuffy hides full of hell-on-the-hoof roaming the Texas brasada, and the Western building railroads, started "the world's greatest pastoral movement" over the Chisholm, Goodnight and other trails, that didn't finally stop until it reached the northernmost limits of grazing on the plains of the Canadian Northwest.

But according to Frederick R. Bechdolt, the top-hand authority on the West and author of many outstanding books of Western fact and fiction, the word "cowboy" was first applied to a group of young men, most of them sons of the fighters who had died at the Alamo, who went into the business of chousing wild —and we mean wild—cattle out of the brasada along the Brazos and Trinity Rivers about a decade before the Mexican War.

(Continued on page 158)

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SAN JOSE (AMORC) CALIFORNIA

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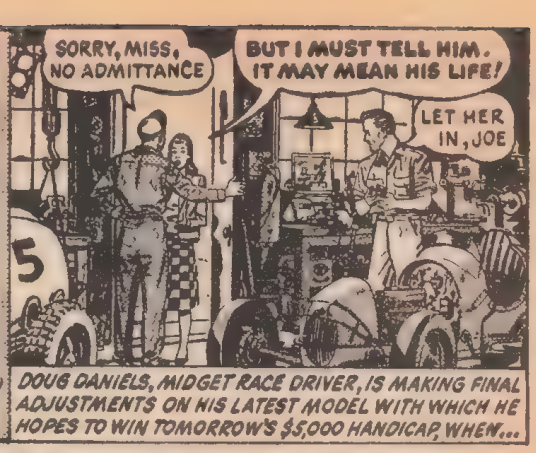

DOUG DANIELS, MIDGET RACE DRIVER, IS MAKING FINAL ADJUSTMENTS ON HIS LATEST MODEL WITH WHICH HE HOPES TO WIN TOMORROW'S $5,000 HANDICAP, WHEN...

SIS AND I ARE SAILING IN THE NEW YORK TO NASSAU RACE. HOW ABOUT COMING ALONG AS BALLAST?
BALLAST! YOU'RE TALKING TO AN EX-BOSUN!
H-M-M... GOOD-LOOKING

FOR SPEEDY, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES AT A SAVING, TRY THIN GILLETTES. AMONG ALL LOW-PRICED BLADES, THEY'RE BY FAR THE KEENEST AND LONGEST-LASTING. ALSO, THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY... PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM NICKS AND IRRITATION. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE CONVENIENT NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE
THIN Gillette BLADES
10-25¢
4-10¢

New ten-blade package has compartment for used blades.

Murdo Morgan returns to Paradise Valley ready to buck the power of the Turkey Track outfit and break its stranglehold on the rangeland!

"Stampede!" Morgan cried, swinging his black around (Chap. XXII)

HIGH DESERT

A NOVEL BY **WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER**

I

TRAVELING eastward, Murdo Morgan left the pines in mid-morning and came into the high Oregon desert. He made a dry noon camp under a wind-turned juniper, drank sparingly from his canteen, and rode on. The sky was without clouds; the sun laid a hot pressure upon him. Sage grew in rounded clumps as far as he could see, the smell of it a desert incense in his nostrils.

He forked his black easily in the way of a man who rides much, the dust of uncounted miles upon him. His face was high-boned, his nose thin; features that had marked all the Morgans he

had ever known. They had marked his father who had left Paradise Valley sixteen years before, a broken and defeated man. They had marked his three brothers who lay buried below the valley's east rim.

that had been blunted by the years. A different purpose had brought him back, although Broad Clancy would not believe it. There was another dream, a greater one than the boy dreams, that Morgan wanted to turn into reality.

Today Morgan rode across country he did not remember. Tomorrow he would be in Paradise Valley. He pictured it now with the nostalgic eagerness of a grown man returning to his boyhood home. He had long dreamed of this return, of how he would stamp "Broad" Clancy under his boot heels, of how he would smash Turkey Track's hold on the valley.

They had been childish dreams inspired by a boy's lust for revenge, a lust

The town of Irish Bend lay ahead, but Morgan could not guess the distance in miles. The country seemed entirely

strange. It was late spring, and the desert, never really green, was feeling the surge of its scant life.

He remembered that it had been fall when he had ridden out of the country with his father, but it was not the difference in seasons that made the desert seem unfamiliar. The years had dimmed his memory of these empty miles. At twenty-seven he retained few of the thoughts and images that had been bright in the mind of an eleven-year-old boy. Even the dream had changed, and grown with time. Now it was a lodestar calling him back to risk his life and every cent of money he had.

Morgan followed an east-west valley, rimrock forming an unbroken line to his left. A jack-rabbit broke into the open and kicked high into the air. A band of antelope raced away from Morgan to fade into the sage. In late afternoon he came to a herd of cattle carrying the Turkey Track brand, evidence that Broad Clancy's domain spread far beyond Paradise Valley.

"I wouldn't, sonny," Morgan breathed. "It's too dark to watch yuh close, so yuh'd better stay right where yuh are!" (Chap. II)

DUSK caught him with Irish Bend still not in sight. He made camp beside a tar-paper shack, built a small

fire and cooked supper. When he was done with the fire he kicked it out, for his was a dangerous business, and he had learned long ago that a man silhouetted against a night blaze made a good target.

Darkness folded about him, the last golden glow of sunset dying along the snowy crest of the Cascades. Morgan lay on his back, head on his saddle, eyes on the stars set in a tall sky. There was this moment when he could thrust worry away and let the dreams build, but another night would bring its sultry threat of violence. He wasn't fooling himself. He knew Broad Clancy too well.

But this night was to be enjoyed—the desert smells, the desert wildness, the great emptiness of this land with its rimrock and buttes, its juniper and sage. It shouldn't be an empty land. The valley bottom could be irrigated, the lower slopes of the surrounding buttes dry-farmed. Given normal luck and a boost from Providence, a thousand families could make a living on land that now supported only Broad Clancy's Turkey Track and a handful of settlers. That was Murdo Morgan's dream—to place a thousand families on land that would be theirs.

He gave himself to speculation about the tar-paper shack. Four walls with a broken window and no door, a roof partly stripped by the wind, a splintered floor. A few newspapers in the corner. Portland *Oregonians,* Morgan noted, not yet yellowed by age. And outside, almost covered by wind-blown sand, was a weather-grayed cradle. Homemade and crude, but hinting at a poignant story.

Knowing Broad Clancy, Morgan could guess the story. Clancy would tolerate only a limited number of nesters on his range and only at places he designated. His men had come here, probably late at night, routed the nesters from their beds, and started them on their way. And a baby had learned to sleep without its cradle.

The run of a horse brought Morgan upright. He listened a moment, placing the horse to the east and gauging its speed. It was coming directly toward him. Pulling saddle and blanket away from the shack, he hunkered there to listen.

Another horse was coming from the south. Morgan waited, tense, not hearing the first horse for a time. Then they were both in front of the shack, and a man called: "Peg!"

Morgan heard the girl's laugh, gay and soft.

"You'd ride through the whole Clancy outfit to get here, wouldn't you, Buck?" she said.

"It was a fool risk," the man said irritably.

The girl laughed again, tauntingly this time. "Afraid, Buck?"

"You know I ain't. I just ain't goin' to stand for you playing around with Rip and eggin' me on at the same time. Yuh're making up yore mind tonight."

"What makes you think I see Rip?"

"There's talk enough. Is it me or Rip?"

"You men are all fools." There was the creak of saddle leather as she stepped down. "You're wasting time, Buck."

"I want to know."

"Of course it's you."

"Then I'm tellin' yuh, Peg. If I ever catch —"

"Buck, are you going to kiss me?"

He swung out of the sadle then. Morgan saw them come together, the two shapes mold into one, heard whispers of talk that reached him as blurred sounds. From what he had heard about the valley, Morgan guessed this would be "Buck" Carrick, a nester's son.

Buck flamed a match and held it to his cigarette, the glow of it making a brief brightness. He had a handsome square face, his eyes dark and widely spaced, his chin a fighter's chin. About twenty-five, Morgan g u e s s e d. Old enough to be in love and foolish enough to meet this girl at risk of his life.

PEG, for some reason Morgan hadn't heard, was suddenly angry.

"I won't ride off with you, Buck," she was saying, "and I didn't have you come here for Rip to shoot! If that's the way

you trust me, get on your horse and keep riding."

"I told yuh this was the night yuh were makin' up yore mind," Buck said roughly. "Yuhve kept me danglin' for two years. I can't stand it no longer."

"Let me go!" the girl screamed.

"We'll get married in Prineville and we'll take the stage to The Dalles."

"Your dad will —"

"We'll be out of the country before he knows anything about it."

"You're crazy, Buck!"

"That's right. Crazy with lovin' yuh. Crazy with wantin' yuh. Crazy with worryin' what Rip Clancy is doin' to yuh. I love yuh, Peg. Ain't that enough?"

"No. Not nearly enough. I'll never marry you."

"You said I was the one. That's all I need to know."

Morgan had crawled through the sage to the shack. He came to his feet, gun fisted.

"Let her go, Buck. It's too dark to see what yuh're up to, so don't make any fast moves."

The girl jerked out of Buck's hands and ran to her horse. Buck stood still, a square black shape in the starlight. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Makes you no never mind. Mount up and get."

"I ain't leavin' her with you," Buck said doggedly. "How do I know what yuh're figgerin' on?"

"I ain't keepin' the girl," Morgan murmured. "But if she rides, you'll sit pat for a spell."

"Maybe I'm not in a hurry, mister," the girl said.

"Then yuh ain't smart."

"You're wrong on that."

"Go on, then."

"I hope I'll see you again."

"Don't ever see her," Buck groaned. "She'll drag yuh through perdition. She's poison."

Peg was in the saddle now, her laugh gay and without the shadow of fear.

"Why, Buck, I thought you liked my poison."

Turning her mount, she rode eastward. Morgan held Buck there until the sound of her horse was lost in the desert stillness.

"All right, son," he said then. "Remember what I said about fast moves."

"I ain't forgettin'," Buck said bitterly, "and I ain't forgettin' what you done tonight."

"I hope yuh won't, because you'll thank me some day. Go on now. *Vamose.*"

But Buck stood motionless as if listening. Morgan heard it then. More horses. Coming toward them.

"I didn't see anybody all day," Morgan said. "Now the desert's alive."

"It's Peg's work," Buck said with deep sourness. "She does that to a man. She's a fever in yore blood if yuh look at her twice. I'm warnin' yuh, mister. Stay away from her."

"Got a guess on who's comin'?"

"Rip Clancy and some Turkey Track hands. Chances are Peg met 'em and headed 'em this way."

"Then yuh'd better be makin' dust. I'll hold 'em off."

Buck stepped up. "You don't owe me nothin', friend. This roan I'm ridin' can outrun any nag they've got."

"I've got my own reasons for not wantin' a ruckus to bust out. Get movin'. Run yore hoss for a few minutes. Then pull up and take it easy."

"I know a few things," Buck said resentfully. Cracking steel to his horse, he disappeared.

Morgan remained at the shack, his back to the wall. There was no moon, and the starlight made a thin glow on the desert.

His lot had been a lonely one. No mother that he could remember. His father dead when he was twelve, nerves shattered and health broken by Broad Clancy's lead, the dream a prodding ambition until the moment of his death. That dream had been Murdo Morgan's inheritance.

THE lonely years then. A chore boy on one ranch after another. A cowhand in Montana. A lawman in tough Arizona Border towns. Finally the Colorado mining camps. Then his luck had turned. He had grubstaked a pros-

pector and the man had struck it. That had given Morgan his stake, enough to buy the wagon road grant that made up half of Paradise Valley.

Morgan smiled now as he thought of the Cascade and Paradise Land Company. He was that land company, but it was just as well Broad Clancy didn't know it for a time. Clancy hated the company enough. He would hate it twice as much if he knew the company and Murdo Morgan were one and the same.

Clancy had used this range for years, Government and company land alike, ignoring the fact that the odd sections of a strip six miles wide on both sides of the old wagon road belonged to the company. The company had made no effort to collect rent, and Clancy had neither offered to pay nor lease the land.

With high disdain for the right of private property, he had considered all the valley open range and had acted accordingly.

II

BECAUSE Morgan's life had been a lonely and womanless one, his thoughts turned to the girl Peg. He wondered what she looked like. He heard again the gay tone of her laughter. It had been a fine sound to hear. It would stay with him like a sweet haunting tune he had heard whistled. Then a sour note turned his thoughts bitter. There had been no trouble in the valley since Morgan and his father had left. Now this Peg had Buck Carrick and Rip Clancy in love with her. It would take a woman, he thought, to stir up a feud at a moment when he, Morgan, was bringing trouble enough of his own.

He caught the blur of running horses. Four of them pointed directly toward the shack. Morgan wondered what kind of girl this Peg was who would allow her flurry of anger to turn her from Buck to the Clancys.

They were there then, reining up in a whirling cloud of dust that drifted toward the shack. "Come out of there, Carrick!" a man in front called.

"He's gone," Morgan said. "If you boys'll keep ridin', I'll go back to sleep."

"Who the devil are you?"

"Makes you no never mind, does it, friend?"

"Yuh're on Turkey Track range. Get off."

"Reckon I'm hurtin' the bunchgrass? Or are yuh lookin' out for the sagebrush?"

"Acting smart won't buy yuh nothin'. I said to drift. This is Rip Clancy talkin'."

"A Clancy don't cut no bigger swath than the next man." Anger honed a fine edge to Morgan's voice. "I aim to finish my sleep."

"You'll shore finish it if —"

"We're getting sidetracked," a gravelly-voiced rider beside Rip said. "This is just a drifter. We're after Carrick."

The man loomed a head taller than Rip, and was wider of shoulder. Morgan could tell nothing about him beyond that, but his was a voice a man would never forget.

"Why don't yuh light out after Carrick?" Morgan asked. "He allowed yuh didn't have an animal that could run with his roan."

Rip cursed shrilly. "He's just a braggin' fool! Where'd he go?"

"South."

He told them the truth and knew they wouldn't believe it. He smiled, thinking they would look for Buck in any direction but south.

"I've got a hunch he's in the shack," Rip said uncertainly. "I'm goin' to take a look."

"I w o u l d n ' t, sonny," Morgan breathed. "It's too dark to watch yuh right close, so I'm thinkin' yuh'd better stay where yuh are."

"You ain't tough enough to stop us!" blustered Rip.

"Mebbe not," Morgan drawled, "but I've got an iron in my hand and five slugs that says I'll make a nice mess out yore bunch while I'm tryin'."

There was silence then except for the heavy breathing of the Turkey Track men. The one behind Rip sounded as if he had asthma.

Blazer rolled away from the flames, drew a gun and fired as Tom Carrick's gun spoke (Chap. IX)

This was an old and familiar business for Murdo Morgan, but he didn't like it. Somewhere along his back trail he had lost his appetite for powder-smoke. He had come here to build, not to destroy. But this was a matter of living or dying.

"What yuh doin' on this range?" Rip Clancy demanded.

"My business, sonny."

"Yuh're a stranger," Rip said arrogantly. I'll tell yuh somethin' yuh need to know. Around here folks do what Broad Clancy says. If they don't, they have trouble. Buck Carrick knew he was off the reservation when he came here. I think he's inside now and yuh're coverin' up for him. If we find him we'll make wolf meat out of him."

"What's between you and Buck Carrick is nothin' to me. Right now my business is to keep yuh on yore hoss."

"If Buck's inside," the big man said, "it makes two guns, and he ain't worth gettin' killed over. We'll wait till the sign's right to get him, Rip."

But Rip Clancy was too young and too much in love to consider the risk.

"There's four of us," he said darkly. "This hairpin can't be as tough as he acts."

A SMART man wouldn't walk into it. Not with the darkness as thick as it was and with Morgan standing with his back to the shack wall. What light there was worked to his advantage. The gravelly-voiced man knew it. Another time Rip would have known it. But Buck Carrick had met Peg here. The bitterness that thought roused in Rip was a potion deadening his natural instinct of self-preservation.

"Too bad yuh're bent on committin' suicide tonight," Morgan murmured. "Yuh ought to give yoreself time to play yore string out with Peg."

It was a long shot that might work either way. Morgan heard Rip's indrawn breath, heard him ask, "What do you know about Peg?" in a high nerve-tightened voice. Then a faint challenging cry came from the south, and a gun sounded, muffled by distance.

"Reckon that'd be Buck," the gravelly-voiced man said. "Let's get him!"

Wheeling their horses, they pounded south toward the gun blast. Morgan felt admiration for Buck Carrick. He had waited out there in the sage to pull the Turkey Track riders off because it was his fight and none of Murdo Morgan's. With a fast horse under him and a black night to hide in, he could play fox and hounds with a better than even chance to get clear.

Murdo built a cigarette and smoked it before he went back to his blanket. Horse sounds faded and desert emptiness was all around him again.

He vaguely remembered the Clancy kids. There was "Short John," older than Morgan, about fourteen when Morgan had left the valley and a runt for his age. Morgan remembered a girl named Jewell. She would be in her early twenties now. This Rip was the youngest. He had been little more than a baby when Morgan and his father had ridden out of the country.

Then the memory of Peg's rich laugh crowded the Clancys out of Morgan's mind. He wouldn't like her. He wouldn't like any girl who played two men against each other to satisfy her own sense of importance, but he would never forget her. . . .

It was early morning when Morgan swung to the south, put his black across the shoulder of a juniper-covered butte, and looked down into Paradise Valley, with the huddle of buildings that was Irish Bend centering the flat. Beyond the town lay the dirty pool of water that was dignified by the name Paradise Lake. South of it a patch of hay land was a bright emerald in a gray setting.

Again nostalgia struck at Murdo Morgan. He and his father had paused here to blow their horses. Morgan had had his last look at the valley then. Sixteen years ago, but the memory was a bright picture perfectly fitting reality.

Rimrock lined the northern part of the valley. Farther east it rose into a number of jagged ridges known as the Hagerman Hills. They broke off into a series of round buttes forming part of the eastern and all of the southern rim of the valley.

Clancy's Turkey Track buildings were directly below Morgan. Far across the valley was the site of the Morgan place. The sharpest picture of all the memories that had clung in his mind from that day sixteen years ago was the sight of smoke rising from the cabin. Clancy had not waited until they were out of the valley to burn it.

Morgan turned his eyes to the north. Along that edge of the lake alkali glittered in the morning sunlight like a patch of white frost. Farther north, just under the rimrock, was another white area Broad Clancy had named Alkali Flats.

MORGAN sat his saddle for a long time, bringing every detail back to his mind. Then his thoughts turned to Ed Cole. Cole was a San Francisco man Morgan had met in Colorado years before as a field representative of a land company. After he had secured his option on the wagon road grant, he had looked Cole up and told him he was a

hundred thousand short.

"I'm working for the Citizens' Bank now," Cole said, "and I believe I can wangle the loan for you. As a matter of fact, we had been dickering for the valley ourselves, but we felt the price was a little steep."

"I'd be beholden to yuh," Morgan said.

"Not at all, son. A straight business proposition."

"Ought to be a good deal for the bank. The valley's worth five times what I'm askin' to borrow."

Cole laughed. "You're an optimist, Murdo. Not many bankers would agree with you."

"Why, Ed, that —"

"I know." Cole held up a carefully manicured hand. "I've been there. It's good land if it had water on it, and there's a lot of it, but don't forget you've got Broad Clancy to buck and you've got a shirttailful of squatters like Pete Royce there at the lake, and the Carricks below the east rim, who won't want to move. What's more, you're a long ways from a railroad. That valley isn't worth a nickel if you don't get settlers on it. How are you going to do that?"

Morgan had an idea, but it was his notion and not Ed Cole's. Shrugging, he said, "I'll figger on it," and left Cole's office.

III

FOR A TIME, Morgan had waited. Then, when the loan had been approved, he had gone immediately to the office of the Gardner Land Development Company. He had never met Grant Gardner, but he had heard of him, a capitalist who was more interested in using his wealth to develop farm colonies than to make money.

But Grant Gardner was harder-headed than Morgan had heard he was.

"I admire your courage, Morgan," he said frankly, "but I don't admire your business sense. You've put a fortune into that road grant and borrowed a hundred thousand to boot. I know the Citizens' Bank and how they do business. If you slip when the time comes to pay, you'll lose your shirt."

"I've got till October," Morgan said. "By that time I'll have the land sold."

Gardner threw up his hands. "Morgan, you're a lamb among wolves. How are you going to get a thousand families into your Paradise Valley by October?"

"I figgered on yore help. I had a wild notion you were the same kind of dreamer my father was. From the time I remember anything, I remember him talking about how land wears out and folks have to keep moving west. He said we had to plow up new land to support a population that's growing all the time. He wanted to help the settlers when they came to Paradise Valley, but they didn't come in time. If I'm wrong about you, Gardner, I'll have to get a job punching cows 'cause I shore will lose my shirt."

For a long time Gardner sat studying Morgan, pulling steadily on his cigar, finger tips tapping his desk.

"You're not wrong about me, Morgan," he had said then. "I'm a dreamer and a gambler to boot. I've taken some long chances on land development, and folks have called me crazy the same as I'm calling you, but I have a conviction that the future of the West lies in agriculture, not the cattle business. We've all got some kind of a job to do or we wouldn't be here. My job is to bring about the settlement of land that can be profitably farmed."

"Yuh're talking my language now," Morgan had told him.

Gardner had shaken his head. "Afraid not, Morgan. I can't see that you've got much chance with your wagon road grant. I've been successful because I've picked my land developments carefully. It strikes me you've been carried away by the memory of an idealist father who left you with some fantastic childhood notions."

"Mebbe that's right," Morgan had agreed doggedly, "but I've seen men who had enough nerve to take long chances pull off some crazy-lookin' propositions. I'll pull this one off if I get the help I need. I've got to have

a national organization to sell the land. You've got it. Would yuh put Paradise Valley over for ten per cent of the sales?"

Gardner thought about it. Then he nodded. "Yes. I don't have anything to push at the moment. I'll give you that much of a boost."

"There's another thing. I'll sell the bottom land in small tracts, but a farmer needs water to make a livin' on that kind of acreage. There are some creeks flowin' into the lake that run enough water for a thousand families if we had the reservoirs in the hills."

"A million dollars?"

Morgan had shaken his head. "I'm no engineer, but I'd say half of that."

"Figure me out of it," Gardner said flatly. "I'm not that big a gambler."

"My idea is to use a lottery to sell the valley," Morgan went on.

Gardner laughed shortly. "It can't be done, Morgan. The laws of the United States forbid it."

"I'll get around that by lettin' 'em bid on every piece of land after it's drawn. We'll have a Government man there to see it's done the way it's supposed to be."

Gardner scratched the end of his nose. "You've got more head than I gave you credit for, Morgan. Tell you what I'll do. I'll sell the land for you and push the lottery idea. I'll send a crew to handle the land sale and I'll be there myself. If you've got settlers who'll buy, and if they're the kind who'll work and don't expect something for nothing, I'll put in your irrigation project."

"That's all I'm askin'," Morgan said.

Morgan rose and reached the door before Gardner warned, "Don't expect any mercy from the Citizens' Bank or Ed Cole."

"I won't need it. I'll have the money."

"When do you plan the sale?"

"September first."

Gardner nodded approval. "Good. That's time enough. Keep me informed. I'll be in Irish Bend before the first of September."

SO MORGAN had taken his black gelding from the livery and ridden north. He thought of the warning Gardner had given him about Cole and the Citizens' Bank, but it did not worry him. He had known Cole personally for six years, and regarded him as a friend. In any case, the money had been loaned and Murdo Morgan owned the wagon road grant. If Gardner did his selling job, the money would be on hand before October.

Now, with his eyes on the valley, a faint premonition of disaster slid along Morgan's spine like the passage of a cold snake. He would have to dispossess the nester families or talk them into buying the land they squatted on.

Broad Clancy was a tougher problem. Yet Morgan held no sympathy for either the nesters or Clancy. They had stubbornly settled on land they had selected regardless of whether or not it was Government land open to entry or company property.

A gray dirt streak of a road cut through the sage from the north rim to Irish Bend and wound on to the south buttes, twisting a little to the west so that it ran directly to a sharp peak rising boldly above the lesser hills. It was Clancy Mountain, and behind it in the high country was Clancy marsh, Turkey Track's summer range.

It was poor graze along the north edge of the valley with rock ridges extending like giant fingers southward from the rim. With the exception of Pete Royce at the lake and the Carricks farther east, the squatters had all located along the north edge of the valley. The bulk of the bottom land was rich with bunchgrass growing among the sage clumps, good graze, an empire worth fighting for.

Morgan put his black down the steep slope to the valley floor and, keeping north of the Turkey Track buildings, lined directly across the valley to Irish Bend. The sun climbed until it was noon high, rolling back purple shadows that clung tenaciously to the Hagerman Hills to the east. It was a still day, utterly without wind, stiflingly hot for so early in the season.

Reaching Irish Bend shortly before noon, Morgan stabled his horse. "Treat him right," he told the hostler. "He's come a ways."

The hostler nodded, tight-lipped, and said nothing, but suspicion was plain to read on his long face. Morgan stepped through the archway. He stood for a moment in the sun's glare, gray eyes raking the street, a lock of black hair sweat-pasted to his forehead.

He made his appraisal of the town without hurry, taking his time building his cigarette. He had the pinched-in-the-middle look and the wide shoulders of a man who had spent most of his life in the saddle. His face and hands were tanned a dark mahogany, his clothes and holster and gun butt were black. In many ways he looked like any of the Turkey Track riders who idled along the street, yet he was a stranger, and therefore set apart.

Morgan left the stable and moved toward the hotel, passing the Elite Saloon and going on across the intersection made by the town's single side street. He walked with studied indifference, feeling many eyes watching from the hidden places of the town. Suspicion was here. When his purpose became known, that suspicion would turn to open hostility.

A tight smile cut at the corners of his lips. He understood this and expected it. A man who has lived with danger as a constant traveling mate develops a feeling that is close to instinct. He was like a dog setting his face toward a wolf pack, bristles up, muscles tensed.

Irish Bend had been no more than a single store sixteen years ago. Now it was a cowtown supported and permitted to exist by the grace of Broad Clancy. When the time came, every hand would be against Murdo Morgan because Clancy willed it so.

This was the way it had been with Morgan. He had been looked upon with distrust before. It was never pleasant, and it left its mark upon him. There had been the fights, and they, too, had left their marks—the white scar on his left cheek almost hidden under the dust

Morgan's first bullet knocked Flint off his feet, but the gunman got in one shot (Chap. XIV)

clinging in his black stubble, the welt of a bullet on his left hand.

THIS was Paradise Valley, this was the town of Irish Bend, remembered in the well of Morgan's memory, and yet entirely strange. Here was harbored a wickedness spawned by suspicion, a shadow across the sun. It struck at Morgan from the false-fronted buildings, from the alleys, from the wide, rough street. There was a sort of grim humor about it. Broad Clancy was a small man, but he threw a long, wide shadow.

The tantalizing smell of cooked food rushed along the street to Morgan. He had not eaten since dawn and he had been conscious of a rumbling emptiness in his stomach for hours.

He turned into the hotel and immediately stopped. A girl stood behind the desk and Morgan's first thought was, "This is Peg."

Immediately he knew he was wrong. She was small, perhaps twenty-two or three, with eager blue eyes so dark they were nearly purple. Her hair was as golden as ripe wheat fit for the binder. Her lips were full and red and quick-smiling. No, she wasn't Peg. That gay, reckless laugh had given him a picture of her, and this girl didn't fit the picture.

She motioned to an archway on his left.

"There's the dining room if that's what you're looking for."

"Thanks. Just couldn't seem to get my eyes on it."

"I noticed that."

As he turned through the archway, he heard her laugh follow him, low and throaty. She wasn't he thought, displeased.

There were a few townspeople in the dining room, two settlers with mud caked on their gum boots, and one table of cowmen. They left as Morgan took a seat, and he had only a passing glance at them. One was young and small, one a thick-bodied wedge of a man, the other middle-aged and smaller than the first with a head overlarge for his body and the conscious strut of a man who is certain of his position and power.

Morgan watched him until he disappeared into the lobby. He was Broad Clancy and he fitted Morgan's memory of him as perfectly as Paradise Valley had.

Morgan stepped back into the lobby when he finished dinner. He saw with keen pleasure that the girl was still at the desk.

"I want a room," he said.

Nodding, she turned the register for him to sign. A pen and bottle of ink were on the desk, but he didn't write his name for a moment. To look at her was like taking a deep breath of fresh air after coming out of a tightly closed room.

He saw things about her he had not seen before—the smooth texture of her skin, the dark tan that could have come only from the long hours under the sun, the freckles on her pert nose, the perfection of her white teeth when she smiled.

She dipped the pen and handed it to him. "You have to sign your name."

"I'm sorry." He dropped his gaze, not realizing until then how directly he had been staring at her. He scratched his name, gave San Francisco as his home, and laid the pen down. "When yuh've been thirsty for a long time, yuh just can't stop drinkin' when yuh come to water."

Capping the ink bottle, she swung the register back, but she didn't look at his name for a moment. Her eyes were lifted to his and he saw no suspicion in them. Again he thought she was not displeased. She did not belong here. She seemed to stand in the sunlight away from Broad Clancy's shadow.

Then she looked down at the register as she reached for a key. She froze that way, one hand outstretched, lips parted, and warmth fled from her face.

"Morgan. Murdo Morgan." She straightened and gave him a direct look. "I suppose you think you're a brave man to come back."

"I never laid any claim to bein' a brave man," he said laconically.

"Would you admit you're a fool?"

"That might come nearer bein' right."

SHE clutched the edge of the desk, knuckles white.

"I don't think you're either one. Only the devil would return for revenge."

"If yuh'll give me my key, I'll find my room, ma'am. Then mebbe yuh can tell me where Broad Clancy would be."

"Do you think I want my father's blood on my hands?" she asked hotly. "Or do you deny you returned to kill him?"

"Yes, I'll deny that. If I kill him it will be because he forces me."

"You're a liar as well as a devil." She pointed at the black-butted gun that snugged his hip. "Your brand is easy to read."

He placed his big hands palm down on the desk and leaned toward her.

"Look, Miss—"

"You were eleven when you left," she cried. "You're old enough to remember that my name is Jewell."

"Jewell Clancy." He said the words as if he could not believe they were her name. "I have seen desert flowers, but I didn't expect to find one here."

She blushed, but her smile did not return. "You can't stay here in the valley. Don't start the fight again."

"I don't intend to start it. I want a room and I want to see yore dad."

"I remember the day you left. I was in the store when you and your father rode by. I'll never forget. I've thought about it so many times. We'd killed your brothers and you'd lost your home, but you weren't crying. You were grown up, even then. Let it go at that, Murdo. All the killing you can do will not set right the wrongs we did."

"I know that," he said roughly, "and I'm tired of bein' called a liar. I didn't come back to kill yore dad."

He saw the pulse beat in her throat, the tremor of her lips. He sensed the struggle that was in her, the desire to believe him battling what her reason told her to believe.

"Even if you were telling the truth," she whispered, "Dad won't believe you. You'll find him with Short John and Jaggers Flint in the Silver Spur. Flint's a gunman, Murdo. He'll kill you. I think Dad hired him as insurance against your return."

"Then a lot of things will be settled," he said lightly, and turned to the door.

"Don't go, Murdo!" she called.

He swung back and had a long look at her. He saw her lips stir and become still. He sensed the rush of emotions that the ghost of a past not dead brought to her.

"Looks like I'll have to do without that room," he said, and left the hotel.

IV

MURDO MORGAN was a direct man without an ounce of sly cunning in him. It was a mark of Morgan character the same as the thin nose and high cheek bones had marked Morgan faces. He knew that this meeting with Broad Clancy might decide his future and the future of the valley, and he hurried his steps as if to hasten Destiny's decision.

There were a dozen riders strung along the bar, and another group at a poker table. Turkey Track men, Morgan knew, for they were not squatters, and there was no other spread within fifty miles or more of Irish Bend. If there was a fight they would back their boss, and that made odds which gave Morgan no chance at all.

The Clancys and "Jaggers" Flint were standing at the street end of the bar. Morgan paced slowly to them, feeling again the covert scrutiny of every man in the room, exactly as he had felt it when he had first ridden into town.

Broad Clancy was not over five and a half feet tall and spindly-bodied. His face was as wrinkled as the last overripe apple in the barrel. He had placed his expensive wide-brimmed Stetson on the bar and his head, Murdo saw, was entirely without hair. He turned, green eyes staring briefly at Morgan from under hooding gold-brown brows, then coldly gave Morgan his back.

Short John, Clancy's oldest son, now about thirty, was the way Morgan re-

membered him. He was smaller than his father, but he was much like the older man, with the same green eyes and the bushy gold-brown brows. There were differences that Morgan noted—wavy brown hair worn long, mutton chop whiskers that seemed out of place on so young a man, and an intangible something that gave Morgan the impression that Short John had never lived his own life, but that he was forever under the shadow thrown by his father.

Short John turned his back to Morgan with the same contemptuous indifference Broad had shown. The slow smile that spread Morgan's mouth did not lighten the gravity of his face. He recognized this for what it was. The Clancys didn't know him and they pretended not to care. They were the king and the crown prince; he was a stranger approaching the court. Let him bow and scrape the way other strangers did.

Anger stirred Morgan, but he kept it masked with an urbane expression. The great pride he always associated with small men was here in Broad Clancy, and to a less degree in Short John.

Uncertainty had always been Morgan's lot; trouble as natural to expect as the sunset. He had been taught by the very circumstances of his life to learn to read men. He came to the bar now and stood beside Broad Clancy, knowing that any way he played this would be a gamble, but that if he pegged Clancy right, there was one way that offered a fair chance of winning.

"Yuh're Clancy, ain't yuh?" Morgan said, his tone a cold slap at the man's dignity.

Broad Clancy stiffened. Short John turned, an audible breath sawing into the sudden quiet. Jaggers Flint, standing beyond Short John, exploded with an oath.

"That's him, Boss. That's the huckleberry who held the gun on us last night at the Smith shack."

It was the gravelly-voiced man who had been with Rip Clancy the night before. He stepped away from the bar, cocked and primed for sudden and violent trouble. Trouble was his business; he made his living that way. He was waiting to kill now, waiting only the signal from the man who had bought his gun.

According to Jewell, this was the man Broad Clancy had hired as insurance against Morgan's return. Morgan knew the breed. Flint had a streak that was mean and cruel, but if he was like a hundred others Morgan had known, he had another element, a weakness that would break under the pressure of hard courage. Now Morgan searched for that weakness.

"That's right, Clancy," Morgan said. "I met up with this man last night. I think yuh cheated yoreself when yuh agreed to pay him fightin' wages."

Quick interest brought a bright glint in Clancy's green eyes.

"Why?"

MORGAN waited, letting the tension build, watching Flint's muddy brown eyes grow wide and hard and wicked, watched desire grow until it had brought him close to making a draw.

"When yuh pay a good price, Clancy," Morgan said with biting contempt, "yuh deserve a good product. All you got is a phony. Just big brass buttons and an empty holler."

Desire faded in Flint's eyes. He swallowed and choked.

"Nobody talks that way—not to Jaggers Flint," he finally said, in a vain attempt to sound tough.

Morgan waited for the signal of his intent, the down drop of a shoulder, the tightening of his lips, the "fire glow" in his eyes. But Flint stood motionless, glowering, and Morgan prodded him with a laugh.

"It's been a long trail, Clancy," Mor-

gan said. "Things ain't the way they used to be. Yuh didn't hire men like this when yuh cleared the valley of the Morgans."

Clancy's eyes narrowed. "What do you know about the Morgans?"

"I know quite a bit about the Morgans, but that ain't the reason I'm here. I want to talk to you. I don't take to bein' jumped by a gun dog. Tell him to draw or drag."

Clancy was frankly puzzled. He nodded at Flint without taking his eyes from Morgan. The gunman muttered an oath as if reluctant to drop the matter, but he moved back to his place at the bar with greater speed than the occasion required.

He had cracked. Morgan doubted that the man would ever have the courage to make a face-to-face draw against him, but he would be a constant threat as long as he and Morgan were both in the valley. Morgan had aroused the hate that Flint and men of his kind hold for another who has broken them. There would come a day when that hate would find expression.

"Yore business?" Clancy asked in a dry dead tone.

"I'm Murdo Morgan, representing the—"

"Morgan!"

The word was jolted out of Clancy. He stood motionless, eyes twin emeralds sparking under the bushy brows, stiff-shouldered as if the temerity of Murdo Morgan in coming here had stunned him momentarily.

"I don't think yuh've forgotten the Morgans, Clancy."

"Murdo Morgan!" Clancy seemed suddenly to come awake. "Yuh came back to kill me, didn't yuh? Go ahead—but if yuh down me, yuh'll have a rope around yore neck inside of five minutes!"

"I didn't come to kill yuh, Clancy," Morgan said patiently. "What's been done has been done. I'm representing the—"

"I don't give a cuss what yuh represent!" Broad Clancy bellowed. He jerked a thumb toward the street. "Get out! I'll give yuh two minutes to dust out of town."

The men at the poker tables had risen and moved to the bar. More than a dozen guns. Morgan knew he could take Broad Clancy and perhaps Short John. He couldn't take them all. But Clancy made no motion for his gun. There had been a time when he would have, but the years had slowed his draw and he had no desire to die.

"All right," Morgan said with biting scorn. "Yuh're not as bright as I remember yuh. I came here to talk over a proposition that's got to be settled before the summer's finished. There'll be lives—"

"Turkey Track stomps its own snakes!" Clancy bawled. "We make our own laws and we enforce 'em. I've got nothin' to talk over with any blasted stranger, and least of all a Morgan."

Short John and Jaggers Flint had moved up to stand close behind Clancy, the others forming a packed triangle farther along the bar. Morgan was entirely alone. A strong current ran against him, a current that would have washed a lesser man through the door and into the street.

"Forget I'm a Morgan," he said. "Put Smith or Jones or Brown or any handle onto me you want to. If yuh'll listen yuh might be able to save the Turkey Track. If yuh don't—"

"Yuh've used up most of yore time," Clancy said coldly. "Ride out of the valley."

FOR a moment Morgan had forgotten the barkeep. If he was shot in the back, there would be no avenging justice. Only a quick burial. They would plant him below the east rim beside the three Morgans who had lain there for sixteen years. He backed along the bar until he could see the apron. The man straightened and laid a shotgun on the mahogany.

Morgan's smile was a cold straight line that toughened his bronze face.

"You used to be a fightin' man, Clancy," he said coldly, "but yuh're old and yuh're afraid, so yuh hire lobos like Flint and wink at a barman to shoot a man in the back. I'm not here to argue.

I came here to find a way to stop a fight, but if it's fight yuh want, it's what yuh'll get."

Morgan backed out of the Silver Spur and slanted across the intersection formed by Main and the side street. He paced along the front of the Elite Saloon and past two empty buildings, moving with challenging slowness.

Stepping into the livery stable, Morgan paid the hostler and got his black, ignoring the open malice on the man's face. Mounting, he rode across the street, stepped down in front of the post office and tied his mount. A hasty departure from town would mean that he had been stampeded by Broad Clancy, an advantage he could not afford to give the cowman.

Morgan paused in front of the post office, shaping a smoke and lighting it, eyes on the pine-fringed slopes of the Sunset Mountains. A white cloud bank lay above the pines, slowly building into grotesque shapes.

When he had shown his defiance, Morgan tossed his cigarette into the street and turned into the post office. He bought a card from the white-haired postmistress, scratched a line to Grant Gardner in San Francisco, and mailed it.

"Murdo."

It was Jewell Clancy's voice. He wheeled back to the wicket. The girl was standing where the old lady had been a moment before, her gaze speculative and interested.

"Do the Clancy's run the post office along with everything else in the valley?" he asked.

"No. It's the only place where I could talk to you without Dad seeing me. When I saw you come in, I ran around the back."

"I had a notion yuh didn't want to talk to me," he said.

Still her gaze was held on him as if trying to cut away the tough exterior he showed the world, as if pondering the real motives that had driven him back after all the years. He saw no fear of him in her eyes, no bitterness, no hatred.

She was grave, not even a hint of a smile lingering at the corners of her full red lips.

"I was outside the Silver Spur," she told him, "and heard what you said. I—I was wrong about you. You didn't come back to kill Dad."

"Thanks for the confidence. I didn't expect to hear it from a Clancy."

"Why did you come, Murdo?"

He took off his hat in a quick gesture as if suddenly remembering it was on his head, a gesture of gallantry that plainly surprised her. He held his silence for a time, pondering her reason for asking him. Perhaps Broad Clancy, regretting he had not listened, had sent Jewell to find out his mission.

"I'll tell yore dad when he's of a mind to listen," he finally said.

"They say all Clancys are stubborn," she said, "but Dad is the stubbornest of all of us. If he wasn't, he'd have seen what I did. When you backed Flint down, you could have forced a fight on Dad and killed him. That's how I knew I was wrong."

"If I'd come here to do a killin' job," Morgan murmured, "I wouldn't have used the Morgan name."

"I thought of that, too." Her smile brought back a little of the warmth he had first seen on her face. "You see, I'm almost as lost as you are. Dad can't understand how a Clancy can see two sides to the trouble."

"Can you?"

"Yes, but it wasn't all Dad's fault. Or did you know that?"

"No."

"Some time I'll tell you about it. That isn't important now. If you aren't here to kill Dad, you're here for another reason. If I knew what it was, I could help you."

"No, you can't help."

"Dad will keep on thinking you're here to kill him," she urged, "so he'll kill you first."

"I reckon he'll try."

"Auntie Jones is the postmistress. If you want me, get word to her."

"Thanks."

Morgan left the post office. Again he paused outside to build a smoke. He was still there when Jewell came through the doorway behind him and

walked gracefully across the street, a hand lifting her skirt from trim ankles as she waded through the dust.

V

THE afternoon sun pressed against Morgan's back as he took the east road out of town. The miles fell behind, miles that were monotonously alike; flat sandy earth, sage and rabbit brush, an occasional juniper that seemed to huddle within itself to hold the small moisture that its roots drew from the arid land.

Then Morgan topped a ridge and came down to Paradise Lake. It was no thing of beauty. Tules grew profusely in the muck along the west end of the lake. A long-snouted hog, suddenly aware of human presence, snorted defiance and crashed into the swamp growth.

On the north shore of the lake the alkali flat, entirely without life, shimmered in the sharp brightness of the sunshine. It was worthless, but the south side of the lake was the most valuable part of the valley. Here were thousands of acres that could be farmed without water, for it would always be moist from the lake. Pete Royce's place, the only farm in this part of the valley, took up but a small fraction of the rich black soil that stretched south from the lake.

The road skirted the front of Royce's farm. A brown haystack from the previous year bulked wide in the field between the road and the lake. Around it, grass, belly high on a horse, bowed in long rhythmical waves before the hot wind. Southward, gray desert stretched in sage-studded ridges toward the buttes.

Presently Morgan came to Royce's cabin. It was made, he guessed, of lodgepole pine brought from Clancy Mountain. There was a scattering of sheds and corrals and, what was most surprising, a well-kept yard between the cabin and the road. Even without the obvious evidence of the washing on the line, Morgan would have guessed a woman lived here.

Dismounting, Morgan watered his horse at the trough. A saddled bay gelding was racked at the hitchpole in front of the cabin. The door was open and, as Morgan turned to step back into the saddle, he heard a laugh, gay and feminine. With a sudden sharpening of interest, Morgan realized that the girl Peg was inside.

Morgan would have ridden on if he hadn't heard the girl ask:

"What are you going to do about the company man when he shows up, Rip?"

"I'll fill him so full of lead he wouldn't float in the lake," Rip Clancy's voice said. "It'll take more'n a company gunslinger to run us Clancys off our range."

Stepping around the trough, Morgan walked up the path that cut across the lawn. Something was wrong. No one but Ed Cole and Gardner and his organization knew that Morgan was coming to Paradise Valley.

Morgan paused in the doorway, an angular shape nearly filling it, right hand idle at his side.

[*Turn page*]

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"I'm the company man yuh're expectin', Clancy," he said coldly. "Now what was it yuh were goin' to do?"

Young Clancy and the girl were sitting on a leather sofa pushed against the north wall. Grabbing his gun, Clancy came up from his seat as if a giant spring had shot him upright. Then he froze, color washing out of his scrawny-thin face. He was looking into the black bore of Morgan's gun.

"Yuh're plumb fast with the talk," Morgan said contemptuously, "but a mite slow on the draw."

Morgan would have recognized Rip as a Clancy. He had the same arrogance and exaggerated pride, the green eyes and bushy brows, but they were red, not gold-brown, and his hair was red. He straightened, slender hands moving nervously as he sought a way out of this.

"I know yore voice!" he cried. "You're the hombre who covered up for Buck last night, ain't yuh?"

"That's right."

"I should of plugged yuh," Rip said regretfully. "Flint talked me out of it. I didn't think he was that short of nerve."

"A Clancy wouldn't be short of nerve, would he? Want me to put my iron back and give yuh another chance to draw?"

Rip ran the tip of his tongue over thin lips. He shot a glance at the girl, his sharp features growing sharper as hate pressed him, as the humiliation of this moment cut deeper into his pride.

Morgan let the tension build until Rip flung out:

"You've got the edge now, mister! Go ahead and walk big. There'll be another day."

"I'll wait for it, sonny."

MORGAN remained in the doorway, gun hip high, watching young Clancy narrowly. He sensed a cold courage in the boy that had been lacking in Broad and Short John. As he watched, a wicked grin broke across Rip's narrow face.

Without turning, Morgan saw he had made a mistake. He had seen only the one horse, and it had not occurred to him that Rip would have another man with him. Now, from the mocking triumph in the boy's eyes, he knew someone was behind him.

There was no time to think about it, to let it play out. He whirled with the unexpectedness and speed of a striking cougar, his gun lashing out with a ribbon of flame. A bullet burned along Morgan's ribs, but the man in the yard didn't fire again. Morgan had moved with perfect coordination of instinct and muscular speed. His bullet had knocked the man off his feet as if he had been sledged by an ax handle.

Time had compressed and run out for Murdo Morgan. Rip Clancy was behind him with a gun on his hip and all the opportunity he needed. Morgan spun back. Then he held his fire. The girl had gripped Clancy's wrist.

"No, Rip!" she was screaming. "No!"

Morgan reached Clancy in two long strides. "I'll take that cutter. I didn't think the Clancys would whipsaw a man like that."

"The man you shot wasn't a Clancy," Peg said, without feeling. "He's Pete Royce."

Clancy stood still as Morgan took his gun. He stood with shoulder blades against the wall, face bone-hard, eyes frosty emerald slits.

"What kind of a woman are you, Peg?" he asked hoarsely. "I'd have killed him if you—"

"I know," the girl breathed. "And I've got an idea about any crawling thing that would shoot a man in the back!"

Red crept into Clancy's cheeks as he felt the girl's scorn. He held his position, saying nothing. Morgan holstered his gun and knelt beside the man in the yard. The bullet had creased Royce's skull. It was a shallow wound, enough to knock the man cold, but unlikely to be dangerous. Morgan lifted him and carried him into the cabin.

"Is there a sawbones in town?" Morgan asked.

"Doc Velie. Go fetch him, Rip."

Young Clancy didn't move for a moment, sullen green eyes whipping from

Peg to Morgan and back to Peg. He had been beaten; he had taken the girl's contempt, and pride had been torn from him and trampled under foot.

"All right," Clancy breathed. "Don't figger I'm done with you, mister, and I've got an idea that when Pete gets up and finds out what you've done, Peg, he'll take a blacksnake to yuh."

"I'll kill him if he does," the girl said flatly. "He'll never beat me again."

"Big wind blowin' off the lake," Clancy jeered. "He'll curry yuh down like he's done before. Or mebbe I'll do it myself. Yuh've had yore fun playin' with me and Buck Carrick. One of these days I'll have some fun of my own."

Clancy stalked out, hit saddle, and went down the road at a hard run, cracking steel to his horse every jump.

Morgan watched while Peg washed the crimson trickle from her father's face and stopped the flow of blood with a bandage.

"Sorry I had to shoot him," Morgan murmured.

"You've got no call to be sorry." She rose and faced him. "I wouldn't have been sorry if you'd shot him between the eyes."

"He's yore father?"

"So he says. I'm not proud of my blood."

Morgan built a smoke, standing lax, back against the wall. This was the first opportunity he'd had to appraise the girl, and he took his time with his cigarette, head bent a little, eyes fixed on her.

Peg Royce was tall, with dark eyes and cricket-black hair combed sleekly back from her forehead and tied with a bright red ribbon. She was eighteen or twenty, Morgan guessed, with a woman's full-bodied roundness. She stood beside the couch, ramrod-straight, making her study of him as coolly as he studied her. She came toward him then, moving in a graceful leggy stride.

"You're a fighting man," she breathed. "I felt it last night, and I had proof just now. You're worth any three men in the valley, but that isn't enough. The company should have sent an army."

SHE stood close to him, head tilted, the fragrance of her hair a stirring sweetness in his nostrils, red lips invitingly close. He saw the pulse beat in her white throat. She set up a turbulence in him, speeded his heart until it was pounding with hammer-like beats in his chest.

"I've done all right," he said. "With yore help."

"I won't always be around," she said, with a shrug. "You'll be fighting the whole Clancy outfit. Dad and the rest of the nesters will be taking pot shots at you. You won't live the week out."

"I never gamble with anybody's life but my own." Morgan slid past her into the yard. "Keep yore dad quiet till the doc gets here. Head wounds are pretty tricky."

"Nobody keeps Pete Royce quiet," she said with sharp bitterness.

"Why do yuh hate him?" asked Morgan.

"Because of what he's done, and what he will do. You'll hate him before you're done. You're here to get him off company land, aren't you?" She shook her head. "He won't go, and he won't pay for the land. Go in there and put a bullet through his head. You'll never get him off any other way."

She stayed in the doorway, scowling against the sun. Looking at her, Morgan saw the lines of discontent that cut her forehead. Suddenly she put it away. She laughed, as gay and free a laugh as she had given Buck Carrick the night before.

"You wouldn't kill him when he couldn't fight back, would you? You're that kind of a fool. The trouble is Pete Royce and Arch Blazer and the Clancys don't play by rule."

"Yuh're pretty as an angel," he said in a puzzled voice, "and as tough as a boot heel."

"That's me," she said gaily, and came across the yard. "Nobody knows what I am. Maybe I don't myself, but I know a little about the game that every woman has played since Eve had her fun. I'll use a man to get what I want, and I'll have a winner when the last hand's dealt. A lot of the pious people

like the Clancys say I'm bad, but I'm honest, and that's more than you can say for them."

"Is it honest to play one man against another until one of them is dead because of you?"

"Who's dead?"

"Buck Carrick might have been after you put Rip onto his trail last night."

"I didn't do anything of the kind, Murdo Morgan. Don't make me worse than I am."

"Then why did Rip come to the shack after Buck?"

"I'd met Buck there before. Old man Carrick hates me. That's why we meet at the shack. Rip probably saw me ride across the valley."

"How did yuh know my name, and that I'm a company man?"

"The wind talks," she said lightly, "and I understand it. I saw you watering your horse. That's why I started talking to Rip about the company man. We don't have many strangers here, so I made a good guess who you were."

"Yuh wanted me to come in?"

"Sure. I wanted to see a fight. You know. Get a man killed over me."

He had called it right. She was as tough as a boot heel. There was little shame or modesty about her. She would use a man to get what she wanted exactly as she had said. Suddenly he was angry. There was no good reason for it except that he resented her coolly confident smile, her frank assurance that she could have him and use him exactly as she had used Rip Clancy and Buck Carrick.

"Thanks for keepin' Clancy off my back," Morgan drawled.

"Don't thank me. I wanted you alive. Don't forget I'm going to hold that winning hand on the last deal."

HE STEPPED into saddle. He sat looking down at her, knowing he had no reason to stay, but not wanting to go.

"Tell Royce I want to talk to him when he gets on his feet," he said.

"He'll never talk to a company man. He'll work around so you'll get killed and nobody will know he had a hand in it. But you're too big a fool to ride out of the country. You'll stay and you'll come back here." She stood with her feet wide-spread, red lips shaping a cool smile, a graceful seductive figure. "You'll be back, but not to see him, and I'll go on trying to keep you alive."

He turned his horse into the road. He didn't look back, but he knew she was standing there, staring at him, and probably smiling. She would be a dangerous enemy. Or a friend who could never be fully trusted.

Nature had endowed Peg Royce with all the weapons in the feminine arsenal and taught her their use. Morgan knew how to fight men like Jaggers Flint and Rip Clancy, how and when to push. He didn't know how to fight Peg Royce.

He tried to put her out of his mind, but she clung there tenaciously, disturbing him and whipping his pulse to a faster pace. Buck Carrick had said, "Don't ever see her. She'll drag you through perdition. She's poison." Now Morgan knew what Buck had meant, but the knowledge made no difference. She remained in his mind.

When Morgan was out of sight, Peg turned back into the cabin. A grave soberness had come into her face. For a long time she stared down at Pete Royce, bitterness and frustration flooding her consciousness.

"You've sold your soul to Ed Cole for a thousand dollars, Royce," she whispered "You'll kill the best man who ever rode into the valley, but you can't have my soul to take to the devil with you. Not for all your thousand dollars!"

VI

LEAVING the Royce place the road was no more than two vague ruts cut through the sage. As Morgan followed it, a thousand memories crowded back into a mind already too full. He had not wanted to come here. This was one part of the valley he'd had no desire to see, but he had to talk to Jim Carrick.

Morgan thought again of his boyhood, of his hound dog Tuck, the clean sound of ax on pine as his father and brothers had built the cabin, the first deer he had

ever shot, the long trip north with the herd from California and his father's words, "There's room enough for us and the Clancys in this valley. Some day the settlers will come and we'll help 'em when they do, but right now we'll take what we can hold."

But there hadn't been room enough in the valley, and the Morgans hadn't been able to hold a square foot. Morgan never had known what had started the fight, but it had been destined from the first. Broad Clancy and Josh Morgan had known each other years before, and the capacity for hatred was great in both of them. Clancy had won because he was the first in the valley and, with his greater wealth, he had been able to hire more men.

The last fight. The motionless bloody bodies of Murdo Morgan's brothers. The funeral. The hollow sound of clods on the pine coffins. His father's gray, frozen face. Broad Clancy had been there. Morgan had never understood that. It hadn't seemed right. Clancy or his men had killed his brothers and then had come to see them buried.

They had left that afternoon, Josh Morgan and Murdo, taking a pack horse and a few things Josh wanted as keepsakes, one of them a tintype of Murdo's mother. Then that last look at the valley, the smoke plume rising from the burning cabins. Those were the things a man could never forget if he lived as long as the desert had been here.

Nor could he forget his father's words. "There's room for a thousand families down there where Broad Clancy runs his cattle. I'm goin' to bring 'em and I'll bust Clancy, which same ain't important. Givin' homes to hungry people is."

But Josh Morgan had died too soon. This was another day and it was Murdo Morgan and not Josh who was here. Breaking Broad Clancy was less important to Murdo than it had been to Josh. Even saving the investment that Murdo had made seemed a minor thing. It was the thousand families that loomed big in his mind—giving homes to hungry people. Morgan had the power to do what his father had only dreamed about.

The Carrick cabin had been built on the ashes of the bigger Morgan cabin. The row of poplars that Josh had planted had been little more than switches when Murdo had left. Now they were tall, slender trees, throwing a shade laced with golden sunlight across the yard.

A huge fireplace centered the lodgepole pine cabin. The cabin winked brightly at Morgan from a thousand eyes as he rode up. When he was close he saw that broken pieces of obsidian had been set among the other stones. Lilac bushes grew at the end of the cabin, their blossoms spreading a haunting fragrance in the air. It was a pleasant place, more pleasant than Morgan remembered. Emotions, long suppressed by the simplicity of his life, rose uninhibited.

East of the house the rimrock made a twenty-foot cliff, and a short distance to the north a creek spilled over the edge in a crystal waterfall. Beyond the creek was the fence that Josh Morgan had built around the graves. It was as tight as Josh had left it, the headstones were still here, the grass green and trimmed.

Two men were idling by the corral, a saddled horse standing behind them. They had been watching Morgan's approach. The dark-bearded one raised a hand in greeting.

"Light, stranger!" he called amiably.

Morgan pulled up beside them and, stepping down, held out his hand.

"I'm guessin' yuh're Jim Carrick."

"That's a plumb good guess," the bearded man boomed. He motioned to the slender man at his side. "My boy, Tom."

"I'm Murdo Morgan." He shook young Carrick's hand and dropped it. It was damp, and withdrawing as the man himself was withdrawing.

"Morgan!" Jim Carrick cried. "Say, you ain't kin to them three we got buried over yonder, I don't reckon?"

"Brother," Morgan said. "I was just a kid when it happened."

"Yuh remember, don't yuh?" Tom

Carrick demanded eagerly. "Yuh came back to fight 'em, didn't yuh?"

"No. What's done is done. If it's a fight, Broad Clancy will make it."

DISGUST stirred Tom's leathery face. "What kind of a man are you, totin' yore iron thataway and talkin' like a pan of milk." He spat a brown ribbon that slapped into the dust and stirred it briefly. "Bluejohn milk at that."

"That's enough, Tom," Jim Carrick said sharply. "Yuh don't need to look for a fight all the time."

Young Carrick cursed bitterly. His was a barren, vindictive face. He wore a bushy mustache that was tobacco-stained, and his clothes were a cowman's, not a nester's. His bone-handled Colt was carried low and thonged down in the manner of a man who fights for pay. He was not a man to be found on a nester place, and Morgan, watching him closely, was puzzled by him.

Tom ran the back of his hand along his mouth. "If I had three brothers salivated like them Morgan boys was and I came back after all this time, I wouldn't look for a fight. I'd shore go out and make one."

Wheeling, he mounted and lined south along the rimrock.

"Mighty proddy, Tom is," Jim Carrick said worriedly. "He don't take to bein' pushed around by the Clancys, but I don't see no way of livin' on this range if yuh don't stand for pushin'."

Jim Carrick was as big a man as Morgan, with brown eyes that were both friendly and honest, and dark hair holding no more gray than the bushy beard. He pulled a pipe from his pocket and dribbled tobacco into it, great hands trembling with the bottled-up emotion that was in him.

"A man can stand so much pushin," Morgan said. "No more."

"Yeah." Carrick slid the tobacco pouch back into his pocket. "I heard old man Morgan died after Clancy ran him out of the valley, but didn't know he had a kid." He swung a big hand over the valley. "Enough graze here for two outfits. Yuh'd have had a big spread if yuh could have held on. No sense of Clancy tryin' to be both Providence and the devil. Bein' the devil is enough for one man."

"A cowman's paradise," Morgan murmured. "Mild winters, plenty of bunchgrass, and good summer graze plumb over to Harney County. Dad used to say that."

Carrick scratched a match on the top corral bar and held the flame to his pipe. "That's right. I reckon Broad Clancy's made more money than he knows what to do with. Don't cost much to raise his beef 'cause his grass is here for the takin'. The herd he hazes south to the railhead in Californy makes the cattle they raise down there look downright puny. Don't get the diseases up here they do in warmer climates."

"Dad used to say something else," said Morgan. "About cowmen pioneerin' the way into a new country, but the farmers always came later. He said in the long run a stockman couldn't use a million acres to support mebbe a hundred men while a thousand families could make a good livin' on the same amount of land."

"Yore dad was shore right." Carrick motioned toward the green strip that marked the creek. "Yuh can raise mighty near anything here. Reckon it'd be a good fruit country, but that's just crazy dreamin'. There's a dozen of us nester families in the valley. We live where Clancy tells us and we live the way he tells or we've got trouble."

"That won't go on forever," Morgan said guardedly. "One of these days Clancy will stump his toe."

Carrick laughed sourly. "Looks to me like he's walkin' mighty good. I'm like Tom a little bit. I ain't proddy, but we're got to fight or get out and quit callin' ourselves men. I was hopin' yuh aimed to throw some lead Clancy's way."

"What are the nesters like?" asked Morgan. "The rest of 'em?"

"Pete Royce is a doublecrossin' coyote who'd sell anything to anybody for an extra dollar. Arch Blazer is a barroom fighter and meaner'n Royce. Some of the rest are the same way, just hidin', I reckon, thinkin' the law won't find 'em

here. The others are like sheep, hatin' Clancy but kowtowin' to him all the same."

"By fall yuh'll see a thousand families livin' here," Morgan said. "Then Broad Clancy will sing a little low."

Carrick took his sweat-stained hat from his head and then wiped it with a bandanna.

"If it wasn't so cussed hot, I'd laugh. What makes yuh think there'll be a thousand families in the valley by fall?"

"Because the Cascade and Paradise Land Company is sellin' acreage in the Middle West now. After the drouth and grasshoppers those people have had, they'll be of a mind to buy and try it out here."

"I'll be hanged!" Carrick murmured. "So the land company is finally goin' to do it. We'd heard the old bunch had sold out. . . . Pull yore gear off yore horse, Morgan, and I'll rustle a drink."

Morgan offsaddled, turned his black into the corral, and swung toward the cabin. He had to have some help, and Carrick was a better man than he could rightfully expect to find. Usually men who stood for pushing were, as Carrick had hinted, men who were willing to accept Clancy's rule in exchange for a place where they could live without fear of the law catching up with them.

Jim Carrick would do.

VII

CARRICK was waiting in the shade in front of the cabin, a whisky bottle in his hand as Morgan came from the corral.

The nester motioned toward a battered leather chair.

"Sit and have a drink," he invited. "I want to hear yuh talk. If the land company is what I think it is, yuh won't get more'n one drink from me."

Morgan grinned as he took the bottle. "It's a hard choice between Clancy and the land company, ain't it?"

"Plumb hard." Carrick sat down with his back to a poplar tree. "There ain't enough of us to fight Clancy. Yuh can't count on men like Royce and Blazer nohow, but the worst of it is that all of us, including Clancy, are just squattin' here."

"If yuh made a deal with the company, yuh'd have a patent to yore land," Morgan suggested.

Carrick reached for the bottle and took a long pull.

"Yuh're talkin' crazy, mister. In the first place, nobody like us could deal with the land company. Money's all they want, and no matter what we've done to improve our places, we'll get our rumps kicked. In the second place, this grant was given to a company that never done a thing to earn it. I know. I was supposed to be on the road when I came here, and it wasn't nothin' more'n a few stakes and five, six boulders rolled to one side. Road? Glory to Betsy, it wasn't no road at all! Just another dirty land grab."

Morgan could have pointed out that Jim Carrick had settled on the best farm site in the valley, not caring whether it was open to entry or not, but he didn't argue. His own father had done exactly the same thing, and held the same low opinion of the company. So Morgan built a smoke, and shook his head when Carrick offered the bottle.

"Yuh're sittin' between a rock and the hard place, ain't yuh?" Morgan asked.

"That's right," Carrick said gloomily. "We furnish Clancy and his outfit with grain and garden sass and hay. That's free to him for lettin' us live here. Once a year he butchers and gives every family a quarter of beef. Yuh'd think he was bein' plumb generous the way he acts. Might as well be livin' in the old days with a king pushin' yuh around. Got so yuh can't even blow yore nose without riding over to the Turkey Track and askin' old Broad about it." He shook his head. "Now if the company moves in, we won't have nothin'."

"Might be yuh're wrong. Suppose a lot of people move into the valley. It'll bust the Turkey Track. Yuh'll have neighbors workin' for the same thing you are. Won't be long till a railroad is built in and Irish Bend will be a big town."

"Crazy talk," Carrick jeered. "I'll lose this place, won't I?" He flung a big hand toward the Morgan graves. "You know why I kept 'em up? Clipped the grass and watered 'em? I'll tell yuh. Them boys died fightin' Broad Clancy. I never knowed 'em, but they stood for somethin'. I keep hangin' on, thinkin' more folks'll move in so we can give old Broad a fight and I want 'em to see other men have died tryin' to make this a free valley."

"Look, Jim," Morgan said suddenly. "I own the wagon road grant. Not somebody back in Boston in a soft-bottomed chair. I want families on this land. I hope to make money and I hope to bust Clancy, but mostly I want folks to develop this valley the way Dad wanted it done."

"I'll be blowed!" Carrick had started to lift the bottle again. He put it back, eyes pinned on Morgan. "Yessir, I'll be blowed!"

"This place is on an odd section," Morgan went on. "That makes it mine, but I don't want to shove you off. I've got a proposition. Interested?"

"Yuh're danged right!" Carrick boomed.

"By September the valley will be full of settlers. They've got to be fed. We'll have to haul water for 'em. They'll need hoss feed. Mebbe there'll be a fight with the Turkey Track. I want yore help. You give me that help, and the day the land sale is finished, I'll hand yuh a deed to yore land."

"Mister, yuh've made a deal, and I hope there's some fightin'."

"What about the others?"

Carrick spat contemptuously. "Like I told yuh, Royce is no good, and that gal of his is a no-good. A Delilah. I like a purty filly same as the next man, but I don't like to see 'em give a wiggle at every man that goes by. Mebbe yuh'll find a few who'll back yuh up, but most of 'em will sell out to Clancy." Carrick sobered. "Yuh're buckin' a pat hand, Morgan. All of 'em below the north rim know that the minute they start goin' ag'in Broad Clancy he'll send Rip and Jaggers Flint and a bunch of riders, and every nester in the valley will get cleaned out."

"I'll go see 'em," Morgan said promptly.

"Me and Tom and Buck will back yore play no matter what it buys us," Carrick promised.

MORGAN leaned back in the chair. He was more tired than he had realized. He felt like a man who has been in a whiplashing gale and will go into it again in a moment, but now is in a pool of quiet. He looked across the valley toward the Sunset Mountains, rising swiftly above the nearly flat desert, the green pine-covering turned a hazy blue by the distance.

Here was an open land, a wide land bright with promise. For the moment Morgan let his dreams build. If they held the dark shadow of trouble, it was no more than he could expect. He could cope with trouble when it came; he had been raised with it. He had always been alone; he would be alone now except for the Carricks.

A man could do no more than fight the thing that opposed him, regardless of the form it held. The fun came in the dreaming and the shaping of that dream into the hardness of reality. Some day he might not be alone. A woman gave a fullness to a man's life. He had never known his mother, but from the things his father had told him, she must have been beautiful and fine, the kind of woman a man sees in his mind, with little hope of finding.

He thought of Jewell Clancy, sweet and fine and practical, but set apart from him because she was named Clancy and he was a Morgan. There was Peg Royce, vibrant and alive, the thought of her enough to send a stirring through him. Carrick had called her a Delilah. Buck had said she was a poison. Still she fastened herself in his mind. He remembered the fragrance of her hair, the thrill of her nearness when she had stood close to him.

Carrick sat in silence, watching Morgan soberly, as if sensing the younger man's thoughts.

"I ain't one to tell another fellow his business," he broke out, "but yuh'd bet-

ter get one thing straight now. Don't have no truck with either Pete Royce or his girl. They'll sell yuh out and shoot yuh in the back. They'll —"

The clatter of horses' hoofs brought Carrick upright.

"Tom!" he whispered. "He's bringin' Buck in. The boy didn't come home last night."

Buck was reeling in his saddle, his face powder-gray, blood a black patch on his shirt front.

"Got shot by Rip Clancy last night!" Tom Carrick called. "Purty bad. Now yuh ready to go after him?"

Jim Carrick swayed drunkenly, a hand gripping a fence post.

"Let's get Buck in," he said harshly. "Then I reckon we'll ride." He swung to face Morgan. "Mister, no use puttin' this off. If yuh want our help, yuh shore as thunder better ride with us."

"That'll wait." Morgan helped Buck down. "Yore boy won't."

They carried Buck inside. Buck was, Morgan saw, closer to death than he had at first thought.

"Doc Velie's at the Royce place," Morgan said grimly. "If Tom busts the breeze gettin' there, he can catch him."

"I ain't goin' after no sawbones," Tom said darkly. "I'm goin' after Rip Clancy."

"Then yuh'll have a dead brother," Morgan snapped. "That slug's got to come out of him."

Still Tom hesitated, his narrow vindictive face dark with the urge to kill.

"Go on," Jim Carrick said. "Morgan's right."

Tom wheeled out of the cabin. The thunder of his horse's hoofs came and was slowly muffled by distance, and died.

"Kick up yore fire." Morgan motioned to the fireplace. "Get a kettle of water on there and find some clean rags."

Jim Carrick obeyed. Buck lay on the bunk, eyes closed, body slack from weariness.

"Can't understand it," Carrick muttered. "Buck went to town yesterday. We've been workin' purty hard gettin' some crops in. Tom, he ain't worth a cuss here. Hunts and fishes and rides all the time. Ain't no part of the farmer in him, but Buck had a night for howlin' comin' to him. Must have got drunk and jumped Rip."

"Tell him, Buck," Morgan said softly.

Buck stirred, his eyes coming open. "Nothin' to tell," he muttered.

"Yuh're forgettin' Peg," Morgan pressed.

It was cruel, but necessary. The one thing Morgan couldn't afford now was a showdown fight with the Turkey Track. If he rode to town with the Carricks, the only result would be a useless death.

"That Royce gal ain't got nothin' to do with his gettin' shot!" Jim Carrick bellowed. "You tryin' to say she did, Morgan?"

"Go ahead, Buck," Morgan urged, "unless yuh want me to tell it."

Young Carrick understood. He struggled for a moment with indecision before he said:

"I met Peg at the Smith shack. This hombre was there. Rip and his bunch was huntin' me. Peg came back and I lined out south, but Rip caught up with me at the lake. We swapped some lead and they got lucky, but I gave 'em the dodge. Fainted once and fell out of the saddle. Tom found me the other side of Morgan rock. Couldn't get back on my hoss."

JIM CARRICK was trembling with rage. He began to curse.

"So yuh're seein' that cussed, double-crossin', no-good —"

Morgan came quickly across the room to him. "You tryin' to kill him, yuh fool? Tell him it's all right."

Carrick sleeved sweat from his forehead. He swallowed and cleared his throat.

"All right, boy. It's all right."

Buck had closed his eyes again. "I love her, Dad. I'll run away with her if I have to."

Morgan jerked his head at the door. Carrick stepped outside, Morgan following.

"Now get this through yore head, Jim. We can ride to town lookin' for

Rip and get ourselves killed, which same won't do no good at all. Buck asked for his trouble. If yuh go off and leave him he'll die."

"You said yoreself a man can stand so much pushin' and no more," Carrick flung back. "I've had mine."

"There's no hurry," Morgan urged. "Wait till Buck's on his feet. No sense in gettin' salivated if it don't do some good."

Carrick wiped a big hand across his face, a driving rage battling his better judgment.

"All right," he said at last. "We'll wait, but I won't have him seein' Peg Royce. Yuh hear?"

"Don't tell me," Morgan said softly. "Tell Buck when he's able to listen."

VIII

IT WAS near sunset when Doc Velie rode in with Tom Carrick. Doc was an old man close to seventy, white-whiskered and gaunt with gray eyes that were unusually keen for a man his age.

"Been kicking things around for a fellow who's been in the valley less than twenty-four hours," he said, as he shook Morgan's hand. "Old Josh Morgan's son, ain't you?"

"That's right."

"You wont live long," Velie said briskly. "Nobody backs Jaggers Flint down, growls at Broad, shoots Pete Royce and peels Rip's hide off his back and lives to talk about it. You just cut too wide a swath, mister."

Tom Carrick's dour face was momentarily lighted by a rush of admiration.

"I figgered yuh wrong, Morgan. From now on count me in. I want to see things like that."

"You'll see him die," the medico said brusquely. "Come on, Jim. Give me a hand. You other two stay outside."

While Doc Velie operated, Morgan told Tom Carrick why he was in the valley and what he hoped to do. Tom swore in delight.

"I'd have braced old Broad myself if I'd had the chance," he declared. "I ain't cut out for no farmer. Mebbe I'll be a town marshal when Irish Bend spreads out."

"Mebbe," Morgan said and let it go at that. Tom Carrick lacked the cool judgment a lawman needed, but there was no point in telling him so.

Hours later Doc Velie came out of the cabin, with Jim Carrick behind him.

"It'll be close," the medico said. "He's lost a lot of blood and that slug was hard to get. Keep somebody with him all the time, Jim, and don't get him worked up over nothing. Might be a good idea to send for Peg Royce."

"She'll never put a foot in my house," Jim Carrick said darkly.

"All right. Let the boy die." Velie pinned his eyes on Tom who had come to stand in the patch of light washing through the open door. "If you want Buck to live, quit talking about getting square with Rip Clancy. No use of worrying him with your tough talk."

Without another word Doc Velie strode to his horse, pulled himself into saddle, and rode westward.

"There goes the one man in this valley," Jim Carrick murmured, "who ain't afraid to tell Broad Clancy what he thinks. . . ."

The next week was slow and worry-plagued. Morgan or Jim Carrick or Tom was always in the cabin or within call. Tom fretted with the inaction, giving less time than either of the others, and the moment he was relieved he would saddle his horse and thunder out of the yard without a backward glance.

"Always been that way," Jim Carrick said, with regret. "I've been a farmer all my life. Always will be. Like to have my hands on the plow. Like to have my feet in the furrow. Buck's like me." He shook his head, brown eyes turned dull by regret. "But Tom's got wild blood in him. Wants to ride out of the valley and hire his gun. Born to die with lead in him, I reckon."

It was not a wasted week for Morgan. He learned the names of the nester families, what each man was like, how far

he could be depended upon. He trusted Jim Carrick's judgment. He felt a closeness and understanding the same as he instinctively felt distrust of Tom. Not of the boy's integrity or loyalty, but his stability, for Tom Carrick was the kind who would throw away his life on a sudden wild impulse, and bitterness over Buck's shooting was growing in him.

AT THE END of the week Doc Velie nodded with satisfaction as he made his examination of Buck.

"Give him plenty to eat and keep him quiet," he said. "All it takes is time." He winked at Buck. "That's what comes of living right." Outside he laid a hand on Jim's shoulder. "I ain't one to meddle in family business, but Buck ain't going to get back on his feet like he ought to unless he's got something to live for."

"If you're talking about Peg —"

"That's just who I am talking about," the medico snapped.

"He's got me to live for," Jim said sourly. "And Tom. He's got the place."

"Blessed if you ain't the stubbornest man outside the Clancy family there is in the valley. Jim, get this through your thick head. Buck has come close to dying. He loves you and Tom, sure. He likes the place even if it ain't yours, but there's something more than that in the living and dying of a man. I don't know what it is, but I've seen it time after time. I know it's something beyond what any doctor can do for a man. I reckon you'd call it the will to live. Put Peg Royce in this house for a few hours and you'll think it's a miracle. Don't send for her, and chances are you'll bury him up there with the Morgan boys."

It was the longest speech Morgan had heard the medico make.

"Jim," he said, when Velie was gone, "I've got to get some chores done. I'd like for Tom to notify all the north rim nesters that there'll be a meeting tonight. Can he see 'em in time?"

"Shore."

"Where'll we have it? Here?"

Carrick shook his head. "It'd be a long ways for some of 'em to come. Let's say Blazer's place. That's central, and it'd make 'em be there." He gave Morgan a straight look. "Be ready for the cussedest fight yuh ever had. A pair of fists is the only thing that'll make Arch listen."

"Then that's what I'll use." Morgan glanced up at the sun. "Get Tom started. You and me will head out of here 'bout noon."

As Morgan turned toward the corral Carrick called, "Where you goin'?"

"After Peg."

Morgan didn't look back. He had learned to know Jim Carrick well, and he measured him as a just man but a stubborn one. He was not sure whether Jim would rather see his son dead or married to Peg Royce.

Strangely enough, he never doubted that Peg would come, but when he reined up in front of the Royce cabin, doubts hit him like the rush of cloudburst waters roaring down a dry channel. Peg was standing in the doorway, black-haired head tilted against the jamb, the same confident smile on her lips that had been there the last time he had seen her.

"So you came back, Mr. Morgan." She walked quickly across the yard to where he sat his saddle. "Get down. Royce isn't here."

"Yuh've heard about Buck?" he asked her.

She nodded, suddenly sober. "Doc stops whenever he goes by. He was worried about Buck for a while."

"He's still worried. When Buck was out of his head he did a lot of talkin' about you."

Interest was keen in her dark eyes. "What did he say?"

"He loves yuh, but I guess yuh knew that. He's still pretty bad. We've got to be gone a day or two. Jim wants yuh to come over and stay with Buck."

She stared at him blankly for a moment before she caught the significance of what he had said.

"I gave up believing in fairies a long time ago, Mr. Morgan," she said then. "I'd as soon start in now as believe Jim

Carrick wants me in his house."

"It's true."

He had a bad moment then. He wasn't sure Peg believed him and he wasn't sure she would come. He thought of telling her it was her fault Buck had been shot, and knew that wouldn't do. He thought of offering her money, and immediately gave that up. So he sat looking down at her and saying nothing until she laughed, not the gay laugh he had heard before but a short, bitter one, as if something had hurt her and she was covering it with a show of humor.

"All right. I guess I'd better not miss seeing Jim Carrick's face when I walk in."

"I'll saddle up for yuh," Morgan offered.

"You could take me up in front."

"This animal won't carry double," he said quickly. "I'll saddle up."

She bit her lip, frowning. "I don't usually frighten men," she said.

"I scare easy," he said. Reining around her, he rode to the corral.

There was little talk on the way back to the Carrick place. Morgan watched Peg for minutes at a time, but if she was aware of it, she gave no indication. He had never seen, he thought, a prettier girl. Her firm chest rose and fell with her breathing. He saw the pulse beat in her white throat. When at last she appeared conscious of his gaze she turned to him, smiling again, and he saw the dimples in her cheeks and the knowledge in her dark eyes.

"Are you going to draw a picture of me?" she asked.

"No. Just store one in my memory. Yuh're Buck's girl."

Quick pleasure stirred her face, then she looked away. "No, not Buck's girl. I'm doing this because you asked me. I thought you knew that."

Again they rode in silence until they reached the poplars in front of the Carrick cabin and Morgan, stepping down, reached up and helped her from the saddle. Jim Carrick loomed in the doorway, his face set.

"Come in, Miss Royce," he said in a dry, precise voice. "Buck's expectin' yuh."

MORGAN put her horse away and waited until Jim called him to dinner. He couldn't guess what had been said and he didn't ask, but there was a look on Buck's lean face that should have told Jim what Morgan already knew. They left shortly after they ate, riding northwest across the valley so that they cut between the lake and the barren Alkali Flats.

The sun, its roundness unmarred by clouds, dropped into the western sky, and the wind, cooled by the high Cascades, touched them briefly and ran on, stirring the bunchgrass with its passage. To the south Clancy Peak was a sharp triangle marking the skyline. The smell of the air was clean and sharp, a good smell rich with sage, a smell Murdo Morgan had almost forgotten, and a hunger to live his life out in the valley struck at him.

For a time he harbored a thought he was afraid to explore. He could have Peg Royce.

"Not many Turkey Track cows in the flat," Carrick said suddenly. "Clancy keeps 'em down in the winter, but his riders have been shovin' 'em to the ranch the last two, three weeks. Reckon he's brandin' now."

"How soon will he start 'em for the marsh?" asked Morgan.

"Any time. He'll take a while to get 'em there. Too much snow to take 'em up yet, I reckon. More snow last winter than any year since I've been here."

But Morgan's mind was not on Broad Clancy's cattle.

"Yuh think the nesters'll come tonight?" he demanded suddenly.

"Shore. They'll come to hear what yuh've got to say, or to see Blazer beat yuh to death. These boys have the notion that if they lick anybody who comes in, they can hold their places." Carrick cocked his head at the sun. "Let's kick up a fire and eat. A man can't fight on an empty stomach."

"How far yet?" Morgan asked.

"A mile or so. No sense hurryin'. Yuh want all the boys there to see yuh

handle Blazer." Carrick reined up and looked directly at Morgan. "You done wrong, friend, and so did I. We shouldn't have left that girl with Buck."

Morgan let it go without argument.

They built a fire and cooked supper. Then they waited until the sun was behind the Sunset Mountains and dust flowed across the desert and laid its purple hue upon it. A quietness came with the twilight, a quietness that worked into a man's mind and called up a thousand thoughts and images and dreams.

Morgan gave no thought to the fight with Blazer. It was immediate, a little dirty job that had to be done before he could do the big job. He let his thoughts range ahead to the families that would be making their homes here in Paradise Valley.

Rising at last, Morgan tossed his cigarette stub into the fire and kicked it out. "Let's ride," he said.

Carrick had been squatting on the other side of the coals, face dark and preoccupied, and Morgan knew he had not shaken Peg Royce out of his mind. "All right," Carrick said.

Mounting, they swung around a rock finger that extended into the valley from the rimrock and saw the red tongue of Blazer's fire.

"Got a good light," Carrick growled. "Like to put on a show."

Blazer had built his fire in front of his cabin. As Morgan pulled up he saw that the cabin was set hard against the cliff and was built of stone. Blazer, he thought, had an eye more for defense than for home comfort.

"Hello!" Carrick called.

There were a dozen men hunkered in a circle around the fire. Tom Carrick was withdrawn from the others and squatting by himself, eyes watchful, jaws working steadily on his quid.

A big man rose and made a slow turn. He said, "Light," his tone heavy with hostility.

Carrick and Morgan dismounted and came into the firelight. Carrick introduced Morgan to each man, holding Blazer back till the last, a gesture of contempt that all understood. When at last Carrick called Blazer by name, Morgan's eyes locked with the big man's, and he made a quick appraisal of him.

Arch Blazer was as tall as Morgan and heavier-bodied. His neck was short, his ears small and set tightly against his skull. His yellow eyes were reddened by dust and sun and wind. He stood with shoulders hunched forward, hands fisting and opening, his wicked temper showing on his dark face.

"So you're the company man we heard was comin' to kick us out of our homes," Blazer growled. "Yuh ain't goin' to do it, Morgan. You try it and I'll stomp yore insides out!"

IX

QUICKLY Morgan made a study of the circle of men, thinking how well Jim Carrick had called it. A ragglety-taggle outfit if he had ever seen one, scared and ragged and dirty. Hiding out from the law and picking up a precarious living from their farms, a living supplemented by deer and antelope and perhaps an occasional Turkey Track beef.

"You know how the valley is held," Morgan said. "Some of yuh are livin' on Government land, and mebbe yuh've filed on it right and proper. If that's the case I've got work to offer yuh and good wages. If yuh're on company land, I've got the same work to offer yuh and a proposition."

"We don't want no proposition," Blazer snarled. "All we want is to be let alone. We ain't leavin' our homes so some cussed land company can sell 'em, when the company stole the land in the first place."

Again Morgan let it go, ignoring Blazer and keeping his eyes on the nesters.

"I'm the company," he said distinctly. "The offer I make now goes. It ain't a case of some fat rooster back East in a plush chair goin' over my head. By the first of September there'll be thousands of settlers here in the valley. If you men will help me feed 'em, haul water for 'em, and fetch hoss feed, I'll hand

yuh a deed to yore land the day the sale is finished. No red tape. No monkey business. How about it?"

Blazer wheeled, a great hand motioning toward Morgan.

"Don't believe this lyin' son. How do we know who he is or whether he'll keep his word?"

"I believe him," Jim Carrick said. "I'm done kowtowin' to Broad Clancy. If Morgan puts this land sale over, it'll bust the Turkey Track, and that's plenty of reason for me."

Blazer whirled on Carrick. "Yuh always was soft as mush, Jim!" he bellowed. "I say to run this smooth-talkin' son out of the valley. I'll plug the first man who sets foot on my land and claims he bought it from the company."

"Then yuh'll be hangin' for killin," Morgan said quietly.

Blazer threw back his great head and laughed. "Hangin', he says, for killin'. You won't be around to see it, bucko. You won't even be around. I'm goin' to bust yuh up. I'll teach the company to send in a long-tongued rooster like you, lyin' about ownin' it yoreself."

Morgan jerked off his gun-belt and handed it to Carrick.

"All right, Blazer. I never look for a fight, but if it comes, I'll finish it."

Again Blazer laughed, deep and scornful. "Yuh'll never finish *this* one, bucko. I'll have my fun and I'll still be here when yore friend Carrick is diggin' a hole for yuh."

"If yuh want fun, here's some," Morgan said, and came at the man fast, right fist cracking him hard on the mouth.

It was Arch Blazer's way to bluff as far as he could, to scare a man and make him back up before a crowd, and half win the fight before it started. He had never had a man bring the fight to him. Surprise and Morgan's blow half-stunned him for an instant. He retreated a step. Morgan, catching him on the jaw with another short, wicked right, knocked him flat on his back.

"Boot him!" Jim Carrick called exuberantly.

From the other side of the fire Tom Carrick watched with cool pleasure, for he had long hated Blazer, but knew that he was not the man to do what Murdo Morgan had just done. The others came closer, silent and watchful, swinging which ever way the fight swung.

Blazer bounced up, a strangled curse breaking out of his bruised mouth. He drove at Morgan and struck him a hard blow on the chest. Morgan wheeled and let the weight of Blazer's charge carry him by. He was on the big man then. For an instant Blazer was off-balance. Morgan ripped through his guard, punching him with rights and lefts, the big head weaving from one side to the other.

Blazer clubbed a fist at Morgan's face and closed with him, swinging a fist into his middle. Morgan was hurt. He threw his weight hard against Blazer, cracking him in the ribs, turned sideward as Blazer rammed a knee at his stomach. Catching the man's leg, he dumped him into the hot coals at the edge of the fire.

Blazer screamed and rolled clear. He came to his feet again and rammed at Morgan, but he was slower this time. The heart had gone out of his fight.

SENSING that this was the moment, Morgan came in for the kill. His fists, ringing on Blazer's head, flattened the man's nose and closed an eye. He saw the blood, tasted his own, felt the jar of each blow run up his forearm and wondered what held the nester up. Then, for no reason that he could understand, Blazer's knees became rubber and he curled to the ground.

Morgan stepped back, thinking Blazer was out, and instantly knew he had made a mistake, for Blazer had rolled away from the fire and had drawn a gun. Another gun spoke, the bullet kicking up dirt a foot from Blazer's hand.

"Yuh're fightin' him fair!" Tom Carrick's angry voice cut across the space between them. "Curse you for a dirty polecat!"

Blazer dropped his gun. He squalled, "I'll get you Carricks for backin' —"

Blazer didn't finish. Morgan fell on

him, knees hard on the big man's ribs, grabbed a handful of hair, and twisted Blazer's head so that the fellow's chin was a clear target. Morgan swung his right, the sound of the blow a meaty thud of bone on bone.

He raised his fist to strike again, heard Jim Carrick call, "That done it, Morgan!" and knew that Carrick was right.

He rose, a boot toe digging into Blazer's ribs, but there was no stirring left in the man.

"Thanks, Tom," Morgan said. He wiped a hand across his bloody, sweaty face, not realizing until then how much he had been hurt. "You boys heard my proposition. Yuh interested?

"Shore," one of them said without enthusiasm.

Some nodded, others stood staring at Blazer as if unable to believe they had seen him beaten.

"All right. If yuh carry out yore end of the bargain, yuh'll get the deeds to yore land." Morgan took his gunbelt from Carrick and buckled it around him. "Blazer will never get a chance to pull another gun on me when I don't have mine. Tell him that when he's in shape to listen. Tell him he'd better start smokin' his iron the next time he sees me 'cause I'll shore be smokin' mine."

Morgan lurched to his horse and painfully eased into saddle. He rode around the finger of rock and presently the Carricks caught him.

"That's one of the things I wanted to see," Tom said, jubilantly. "Blazer's run over everybody ever since he's been here."

"What about the others?"

Tom laughed shortly. "Blazer'll tuck his tail and run. He won't want to swap smoke with you, and with him gone, the rest will be mighty happy haulin' yore hoss feed and water."

Jim Carrick shook his head. "I ain't shore about that, Tom. Not with Pete Royce around."

"I don't think I feel like ridin' back, Jim," Morgan said.

"There's a spring down here a piece. We'll camp there."

After they had made camp and Morgan lay with his head on his saddle, he gave voice to a question that had been nagging his mind.

"Some men just like to fight, but I'm not shore about Blazer. The proposition I offered 'em was fair. Why would he jump me thataway?"

"He's just an ornery cuss," Tom said.

"Might be more to it," Jim Carrick said. "He's plumb thick with Royce."

Presently the run of horses came to them.

"Some of the boys goin' home," Morgan murmured.

"I'll see," Tom said and, mounting, rode away.

"Can't set still," Jim growled. "Had ants in his pants ever since he could walk. Ridin' most of the time. Knows more about what goes on than anybody else in the valley."

Morgan closed his eyes. There was no understanding how a man like Jim Carrick could have Tom for a son, but Tom was not one to change. . . .

MORGAN and Jim Carrick breakfasted at dawn and reached the Carrick place by midmorning.

"Go on in," Carrick said as Morgan dismounted. "I'll put the hosses away."

"I'm in no hurry," Morgan said.

They walked into the cabin together. Peg was sitting by the bed, reading. She looked up when she saw them, carefully closed the book, and rose.

"How yuh feel, son?" Jim asked.

"Fine." Buck grinned at Peg. "She's the right medicine for a man."

Peg wasn't listening. Her eyes were on Morgan, concern in them. "You had trouble?" she asked.

"He licked Blazer," Jim Carrick said. "That's all."

Peg picked up the scarf she had worn around her head. "I'll be going."

"Thanks," Jim said carefully. "I'll saddle up for yuh."

"Yuh'll come back?" Buck asked, in a low tone.

"Sure, I'll be back," Peg said easily, and left the cabin with Jim Carrick.

Morgan idled in the doorway, shoulder blades pressed against the jamb, feeling the soreness that would be days leaving him. He watched Peg mount and wave to him. He raised his hat and nodded, unsmiling. He was thinking again that he could have Peg Royce and panic was in him with the rush of knowledge that he wanted her.

"Morgan!" Buck called.

Morgan walked to the bed and sat down. "Want me to read to yuh?"

"I told yuh she was poison," Buck said harshly. "I said she was a fever that got into yore blood. Remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. Why?"

"Yuh ain't foolin' me no more'n a little. Yuh're playin' smart, goin' after her and all, but yuh ain't foolin' me."

"What in thunderation are yuh talkin' about?" Morgan demanded sharply.

"You know all right." Buck's fists clenched above the blanket. "I saw the way she looked at yuh. I'm tellin' yuh, Morgan. Let her alone or I'll kill yuh!"

X

PEG ROYCE did not sleep the night she returned from the Carrick place. Her leanto room held the day's heat with grim tenacity; the smell of her straw tick was musty and stifling. She lay on her back, motionless, staring at the black ceiling. Tomorrow would be another day, the same routine, the same frustrations, the empty sagebrush miles all around, choking her, imprisoning her, walling her in from the world she had seen in her dreams.

The staccato beat of her clock marked the slow passage of the minutes, while the gray ashes of discontent piled high in her mind.

Daylight wiped out the darkness in the corners of her room. Royce was gone. She didn't know where. He was gone when she had come home the day before. It was that way most of the time, one of the few things for which she could be thankful.

She should get up and build the fire. Feed the chickens. Milk the cow. Water the horses. Cook breakfast. She would get a cursing if Royce came home and found her in bed. Maybe more.

Anger smoldered in her. No, nothing more. She'd had the last beating she would take from him. She reached under her pillow and pulled out the small pistol she kept there. No, she would never take another beating from Pete Royce.

She should get up, she told herself. She sat on the edge of her bed, took off her nightgown and lay back. No hurry. What was waiting to be done could keep on waiting. If Royce didn't like it, he could stay home and take care of it himself.

The sun laid a pattern of black and gold across her bed. She propped herself up on her elbows and looked at her slim body. She might as well be a squaw. She had her choice of a cocky scrawny-faced kid who wanted her, but had never offered her the Clancy name, and Buck Carrick who had planned to kidnap and take her to Prineville to marry him, a nester whose father didn't even own the land they lived on.

Then she thought of Murdo Morgan. But then she had been thinking of Murdo Morgan all night.

Peg had never really known another woman. Her mother was a vague blurred memory. There were a few nester women below the north rim. Dowdy women broken to the daily labor of this land, women for whom the flame of life had gone out long ago. Then there was Auntie Jones in town and Jewell Clancy, who had left her strictly alone.

There had been men around as long as she could remember. All of them but Ed Cole had run to a type. Like Arch Blazer. Tough and dirty and smelling of whisky and horses and tobacco and stale sweat. Men who had wanted to paw her, men that even Pete Royce did not trust with her.

She knew men, knew the urging of their desires. She had never met a man she could not have had if she had wanted him, even Ed Cole, until Murdo Mor-

gan had ridden into the valley.

She had heard men talk lightly about love as if it were the same as desire. Probably it was with most men she had known. It would not be with Morgan, but what did he want in a woman that she did not have or could not give him?

Now, picturing his tall, hard-muscled body, his black hair and high-boned face, the powder-gray eyes that seemed to look beyond the limits of ordinary men's vision, she felt an undefined longing that she had never felt before. She asked herself if it was love, and suddenly regretted what she had said to him about holding the winning hand on the last deal.

Outside a rooster crowed, a harsh sound that brought her upright in bed. She shook her black hair out of her eyes, slid into her worn slippers, and went into the other room. She built a fire, pumped water into the coffee pot and set it on the front of the stove. The pine kindling was exploding with dry crackling pops when she went back into her room.

She sat down in front of her dressing table and began combing her hair. She had made her table as she had made everything else in her room except the mirror on the wall that gave back a waxy image of her face.

Her dressing table had been a huge goods box. She had built shelves into it, papered the inside with red wallpaper, and covered the top with a flounce of print. She had made the rag rug that covered her floor. It was hers, all of it, a sanctuary where Pete Royce let her alone unless he had work for her to do.

SHE combed her hair sleekly back from her forehead and tied it with a red ribbon. She dressed then, slowly, and was buttoning the last button when she heard horses. She ran out of her room, a wild hope in her that it would be Morgan. But it was Pete Royce. A moment later she recognized the man with him. Ed Cole.

Peg was slicing bacon when they came in. She had the table set, the coffee boiling, and Cole stopped in the doorway, sniffing.

"Say, that smells good, Pete," Cole said. "This girl of yours is getting smarter all the time."

"Gettin' lazier, yuh mean," Royce grunted. "Ridin' at night. Wantin' to sleep all day. I'll have to tan her with a blacksnake so she won't forget who's boss around here."

Peg wheeled, balancing the razor-sharp hunting knife in her hand.

"I've told you, Royce. I'm telling you again. You lay a hand on me and I'll kill you."

Royce dropped into a chair. "See how it is, Ed? The mountain men had the right idea. Marry a squaw and lodgepole her when she got out of hand."

[*Turn page*]

WHEN JIM CANTRELL ARMS HIMSELF WITH A COLT AND HEADS FOR BORDER BASIN, HE RIDES STRAIGHT INTO TROUBLE — AND BECOMES A HUNTED RENEGADE OF THE BADLANDS IN

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He was under average height, a stocky man with shiny blue eyes set close together astride a flat nose that had been smashed under another's fist years before. He leaned back in his chair and, drawing a cigar from his pocket, slid it between dark teeth.

"A wildin', this filly," he remarked. "Why don't you marry her, Ed?"

Cole came across the room to where Peg stood at the table.

"You're lovelier every time I see you," he said. "You know your dad's suggestion isn't bad. How about going back with me? You'll like San Francisco."

"Royce said something about you marrying me," she said pointedly. "Is this a proposal?"

His smile was a quick, amused curve of his lips. "Of course, but it depends on breakfast. I'm hungry enough to eat a curly wolf."

"You can nibble on your fingers till I get the bacon cooked," she said.

"Couldn't do that. I'm no cannibal."

He went back to sit across from Royce. Peg moved around the table so that she could watch him while she stirred up the biscuits. At thirty-five Cole was the most handsome, perfectly-mannered man she had ever known. She had been attracted by him when he had been in the valley before. He had tried to kiss her once, and she had slapped him. She had never been sure why, and she didn't know what she would do if he tried again.

His eyes were blue, and as guileless as a child's. His hair was light brown and curly, his teeth white and perfect when he smiled. But Peg Royce understood him. He played his own sharp game. He had not said anything about taking her to San Francisco the other time he was here. He had his reasons now, or he wouldn't have made the offer.

Peg slid the pan of biscuits into the oven and, straightening, scratched her chin, leaving a daub of flour on it. It was her chance. Cole needed Royce and she could force a bargain from Cole. San Francisco! The city of dreams. Why not?

But after breakfast Cole came to her and slid an arm around her.

"About this San Francisco deal," he murmured. "I've got to get right back, and I need you here. If I took you now, I wouldn't have time to show you the town."

"In other words you don't want me to go." She jerked away from him and moved around the table. "That's fair enough. I didn't say I would go."

He stroked his pointed, carefully trimmed mustache, his smile confident. "You didn't say so, but you would. Any woman would."

"You're bragging," she murmured. "Why not take Jewell Clancy?"

"She's not as charming as you are. I take only charming women to San Francisco." He laid a pile of gold coins on the table. "Let's not lose sight of the reason I want you to stay here. I'm no gambler, Peg. I'm going to crack Murdo Morgan, and I want it a sure thing."

"She can't do nothin' I can't," Pete Royce said. He picked up the cigar he had been smoking before breakfast and lighted it again. "No use payin' her good money. She'll just blow it on duds."

"Your daughter has capacities you aren't aware of, my friend." Cole brought his eyes back to Peg's face. "Pete tells me you've met Morgan. He's been riding with a lot of luck. If that lasts, I'll need you."

"He's got to the end of his luck," Royce said darkly. "He'll never lick Arch Blazer again."

PEG TOOK a sharp breath. So they knew about the fight! Cole was worried, or he wouldn't be piling gold on the table in front of her.

"Blazer won't give him another chance," Cole said. "When we see Clancy today, I have a notion old Broad will do the job for us." He picked up the gold coins and dropped them again. "Like the sound of that, sweetheart?"

"What do I do to earn it?" she breathed.

"You're my ace in the hole. Suppose Clancy doesn't do the job? Or things don't work right for your dad to stop Morgan's clock? That's where you step in. You're persuasive, honey. You could wangle anything out of friend Morgan or even talk him into a foolish move."

"Like what?"

Cole shrugged. "Your dad or Blazer might want to know where he'll be at a certain time. Might even knock him on the head and throw him into the tules for the hogs. How's that, Pete?"

Royce chuckled. "It's a good idea."

"How about it, sweetheart?" Cole was watching her closely.

"I couldn't wangle anything out of Morgan," she said.

"You can get anything out of any man if you try," he said impatiently. "Can I depend on you?"

"Certainly. And when it's over?"

"San Francisco. I'll have the most charming girl in the city."

She stood in the doorway as they mounted and rode west to Irish Bend, the gold clutched in her hand. Cole had kissed her again and this time she hadn't slapped him. He was playing his game and she was playing hers.

"I didn't tell you what you could depend on, did I, Mr. Cole?" she said softly. . . .

Murdo Morgan stayed at Carrick's until Buck was out of danger. The day he left, young Carrick was sitting on the porch, thin and filled with self-pity, his uncut hair shaggy-long. It would be weeks before he was himself, but there was no more need for Morgan here, and he was beginning to feel the pressure of time.

Jim Carrick watched Morgan saddle his black, more solemn-visaged than usual.

"Tom rode off again this mornin'," he said. "He's goin' to find the trouble he's lookin' for if he keeps at it."

Morgan nodded. Tom was all right. It was Buck who worried Morgan. Peg hadn't been back after that one time. The truth was gnawing at Buck with terrible tenacity.

"Tom can take care of himself," Morgan said, as he led his horse to the trough. "I ain't shore Buck can."

"I ain't neither," Jim said dully. "If it was any other girl. . . . Oh, shucks, I ain't goin' after her again. You hear?"

"Yore goin' after her don't change nothin'," Morgan observed.

"What are you goin' to do?"

"I'm aimin' to see Broad Clancy first thing. I've got to get this business lined out so there won't be no trouble when the settlers start rollin' in."

"Take more'n words to change Clancy's way of seein' things."

Morgan stepped into saddle. Jim Carrick was right, but if there was fighting to be done, it had better be done now.

"Thanks for givin' me a hand, Jim," he said.

"It was you that give me a hand. If yuh hadn't sat up with Buck, I don't know how I'd made out. Tom wasn't no help."

"Yuh gave me more of a hand than yuh figgered," Morgan said somberly. "Yuh're the balance wheel in the valley, Jim. I'm countin' on yuh. So long."

Morgan reined his black toward the road.

"Take care of yoreself, son!" he heard Jim call after him.

Then sourness was born in Morgan. He raised a hand in farewell to Buck, but young Carrick made no answering gesture. Jealousy stamped a festering bitterness on his face.

Morgan wouldn't stop at the Royce cabin. He would ride on. Peg was Buck's girl. But when Morgan passed the Royce place, he saw Peg working in the yard. Coming to the road, she waved to him, and despite his promise to himself he reined over to her.

"It's my friend Murdo," she said. "Come in."

HE LIFTED his hat, eyes on her. She had a firm curved body and a sort of straightforward daring that he liked. She stirred him now as she always did when he was with her.

"Howdy, Peg," he said soberly.

She studied him a moment, a smile striking at the corners of her mouth. It wasn't, he thought, as confident a smile as she had given him before. Something had happened to her, softening her.

"I've got a pot of coffee on the stove, Murdo. Come in. Royce isn't around." She seemed to sense instantly that she had said the wrong thing. "I don't mean you're afraid of him. He's just a nuisance."

He shouldn't go in. She was Buck Carrick's girl. He couldn't forget that. But he did go in and, as he drank the coffee, another thought struck him. Buck said she was his girl, but it wasn't Peg's idea. There was no mistaking what she was trying to tell him.

He finished his coffee and shook his head when she reached for the pot.

"I've got to be ridin'," he said.

"Ed Cole was here the other day," she said suddenly.

"Cole!" He stared at her, surprised that Cole was in the valley. "Does he know I'm here?"

She said, "Yes," her face holding an expression he didn't understand.

"Why didn't he see me?" Morgan asked.

"I guess he didn't want to."

Anger touched him. "I'd want to see a friend if I was this far from home."

"Friend?" She laughed shortly. Then, seeing his face, she shut her lips against what she had meant to say.

"Shore," he said. "I knew him in Colorado before I ever had a notion I'd own half the road grant."

He automatically reached for tobacco and paper and twisted a cigarette, puzzling over Cole's reason for being here. The Citizens' Bank had no interest in the grant unless Morgan failed to repay his loan within the specified time. But if Cole had come only out of friendship, he wouldn't have left without seeing him.

XI

WALKING around the stove, Peg stopped near Morgan. There was a new expression in her dark eyes as if something had disturbed her.

"I know what you're up against better than you do, Murdo," she said softly, "but there isn't much I can do except to tell you to ride on while you're still alive."

"I won't do that," he said roughly.

"I know." She laid a hand on his arm, making a soft pressure there. She was watching him closely as if wondering what she should say. "There is something else, Murdo. Don't trust anyone. They're all against you."

The cold cigarette dangled from a corner of his mouth. He fished a match from his pocket, but he didn't bring it to life. He held it there, half-lifted in front of him, his mind trying to pierce the veil behind which she had hidden her thoughts.

"A man's got to trust somebody," he said. "Yuh can't live alone."

She had told him all she would. A quick smile flowed across her face, warm and compelling. Her hand on his arm was soft.

"You wouldn't have to live alone, Murdo."

He dropped the match and tore the cigarette from his mouth. Gripping her shoulders, he jerked her to him and kissed her, her lips turning up to meet his. They were warm lips, filling him with ancient man-hunger the same as they had filled Buck Carrick and Rip Clancy. He let her go, the thought of the other two filling his mind with gray distaste.

She didn't move back. Her arms were around his neck, her lips parted. He saw that she was pleased with what she had done.

"That was what I meant, Murdo," she breathed.

"Yuh've had yore fun," he said roughly. "I guess that was what yuh wanted."

He wheeled away from her and strode out of the cabin and across the yard to his horse. She ran after him, suddenly fearful.

"Murdo, didn't it mean anything to you?"

He didn't answer until he was in the saddle.

"Yeah, it meant somethin'," he said

then. "Made me think of what Buck said."

"What was that?"

"That yuh're a fever in a man's blood if he looks at yuh twice. I made that mistake. One look should have been enough."

"Murdo, this is different. I never promised Buck!"

Yuh're his life," Morgan said soberly. "I've learned to know him pretty well the last few days. Why don't yuh go back and see him?"

"All right," she said. "I will, because you've asked me."

"Thanks."

Morgan lifted his Stetson and rode on toward Irish Bend, a vague unease in him. She was going to see Buck because Murdo Morgan had asked her to. That left him in her debt and that was not the way he wanted it.

The empty miles dropped behind. The lake and the tule-carpeted swamp were lost behind a ridge. A band of horses broke across the road and thundered on through the sage and rabbit brush toward the pine hills to the south.

Morgan was hardly conscious of them. His thoughts were a tumbling white-frothed stream within him. Peg had wanted to tell him something, then had been afraid to say it, but when he tried to concentrate upon it the memory of her kiss ripped through the pattern of his thoughts.

It was nearly noon when Morgan reached town. He racked his horse in front of the store, his gaze sweeping the street. It was the first time he had been in Irish Bend since the day he had come to the valley, but it was entirely different. Then the Turkey Track outfit had been in town.

Now Irish Bend was almost empty. A single horse stood in front of the Elite Saloon, head down, dozing in the sun. A short-legged dog padded down the the middle of the street, ears proudly erect as if the town were his by conquest instead of default.

Turning into the store, Morgan asked for a pencil and sheet of paper. The storeman eyed him a moment speculatively before he slid a stubby pencil and a torn fragment of wrapping paper across the counter.

"That'll do if yuh ain't fussy," he said, his tone intentionally hostile.

MORGAN drew a knife from his pocket and whittled a sharper point to the pencil.

"Where is everybody?" he asked.

"It's always this way when the Turkey Track ain't in town," the storeman said. "The boys are windin' up brandin' today. Reckon they'll be headin' out for the high country. Be plumb quiet till they get back."

"Mebbe not." Morgan began writing. "Yuh'll have more business this fall than yuh ever had. Better get stocked up."

The man snorted, started to say something, then shut his mouth with a click of his ill-fitting store teeth. He held his silence until Morgan ordered:

"Hang this up where folks can see it."

"The devil I will!"

"I said hang it up." Morgan grabbed a handful of the man's shirt and jerked him against the counter. "This has been Broad Clancy's town, but it ain't goin' to be much longer. I want that paper hung up."

"I'll hang it." The storeman turned the paper and read:

THE CASCADE AND PARADISE LAND COMPANY ANNOUNCES AN AUCTION OF ITS LAND BEGINNING SEPTEMBER FIRST. STOCKMEN AND SETTLERS DESIRING TO SECURE TITLE TO THE COMPANY LAND THEY HAVE BEEN SQUATTING ON ARE ADVISED TO CONTACT MURDO MORGAN WHILE HE IS IN THE VALLEY.

MURDO MORGAN, CASCADE AND PARADISE LAND COMPANY

The storeman lifted his eyes to Morgan. "If they're goin' to contact you, friend, they'll shore have to hurry 'cause yuh won't be around much longer."

"That so?" drawled Morgan.

"Yuh'll ride out or yuh'll get run out."

"Let me do the worryin' friend," Morgan shrugged. "Where yuh goin' to hang this paper?"

Growling, the storekeeper picked it up and jabbed it over a nail behind the tobacco counter.

"This is one place they all come."

Morgan nodded. "Is there a lawman in town?"

The storeman's laugh was a contemptuous snort. "Yuh wantin' some protection?"

"You'll need the protection if yuh keep tryin' to be smart," Morgan said angrily. "It don't fit yuh, mister."

Humor faded from the man's eyes as if it had been slapped out of him. Fear touched him, narrowing his eyes, and bringing the self-hatred it does to a man when the veneer of his toughness has been stripped from him.

"Abel Purdy," he grunted. "Past the post office."

"Thanks." Morgan swung to the door and, pausing, looked back. "If that sign ain't there the next time I come in, I'll hang yore hide up in its place, and don't yuh forget it."

The storeman's lips twitched, his sullen curses reaching Morgan only as incoherent growls. Grinning, Morgan turned into the street. Irish Bend had been geared to Broad Clancy's pleasure. The land sale would change that, along with everything else in Paradise Valley.

Purdy's office was beyond the post office, with a weed-grown vacant lot between. Morgan stepped through the doorway, said "Howdy," and had a quick glance around. There were three straight-backed chairs against the wall, a roll-top desk in the corner, covered with a litter of books and papers, and an ancient swivel chair. That was all except for the dust, the splinters of a broken stool in the corner, and Abel Purdy.

"Good morning." Purdy rose and held out his hand. "I'm Abel Purdy and I believe yuh're Murdo Morgan. I've heard of yuh."

Morgan shook the proffered hand. "I ain't surprised. A stranger gets talked about."

"Yuh're like the new broom, Morgan. Sweeps up a lot of trash until somebody saws off the handle. It ain't much good after that." Purdy motioned to a chair. "Sit down. I never like to talk with a standin' man."

Morgan took the chair. He liked Purdy, as he had instinctively disliked the smart-alec storekeeper. Purdy might have been thirty or fifty. It was hard to judge his age. His head seemed to be entirely without hair and was ball-round. Then Morgan saw that he was wrong. Purdy had hair, but it was clipped short, and was so thin and light-colored that it took a second glance to realize it was there.

"Mebbe nobody's goin' to saw this broom off," Morgan said.

"Somebody will try." Purdy removed his thick glasses and rubbed his eyes, red-streaked from too much reading, the pupils nearly as colorless as his hair. "Time always catches up with us, Morgan. Broad Clancy thought it never would, but things that happen in the rest of the country will sooner or later happen here. Half of the valley is owned privately. Ignorin' a fact like that don't change the fact."

"Well," Morgan said, "I'm glad somebody around here knows that."

PURDY laid a marker between the pages of the book he had been reading and closed it.

"Yuh're the law, ain't yuh?" asked Morgan.

"Yes, I'm the law." Purdy's smile was self-mocking. He wiped a sleeve across the shiny star pinned on his shirt. "That, of course, all of us here understand. I'm the marshal, the mayor, and the justice of peace. I preside over the town meetin's. I arrest a drunk if he is a settler. Then I jail him." He motioned to a door behind him. "We have one cell. I sit as judge if a trial is necessary, but a trial is never necessary unless the arrested man is a settler. Yuh understand?"

Morgan nodded. It was plain enough, the same as Broad Clancy's rule was plain to see everywhere that Morgan looked.

"But it's like yuh said awhile ago. Clancy can't change facts by shuttin' his eyes. The company is sellin' the wagon road grant to settlers."

"Mebbe," Purdy said skeptically. "It will take a lot to beat Clancy, and my experience with nesters tells me they

won't stand against a show of force."

"This is different, Purdy. We're sellin' the land now to people in the Middle West. They pay ten per cent down when they sign their contract and give a note for the balance, payable at the time of the drawin'. I'm gamblin' they'll fight for what they already own."

Interest sharpened in Purdy's pale eyes. "It might work."

"Another thing. This ain't free Government land, so we're bound to get a better class of farmers than the usual raggle-taggle outfits that show up every time there is a land rush."

"That might be," Purdy admitted thoughtfully. "Does Clancy know this?"

"I aim to tell him today. He wasn't of a mind to listen the time I saw him in the Silver Spur."

"Suppose you die?"

"Then I'll be dead, but the land sale will come off regardless."

"Clancy may have a different idea."

Morgan shrugged. "I aim to keep alive. I didn't come in here to talk about Clancy. What I want to know is this. When the settlers come—that'll be the middle or the last of August—will they get the protection of the law as fully as you can give it?"

Purdy reached for a corncob pipe, that self-mocking smile turning his mouth bitter.

"Yuh'll have it, as well as I can give it. Notice what I say, Morgan—as well as I can give it. I'll explain that. I have a job. It pays a living. I don't know what I'd do or where I'd go if I lost it. Love of security does that for a man, and my security lasts as long as Broad Clancy lasts."

Purdy was making it as plain as he could without admitting his own abasement. The hard years had reamed the heart out of this man, leaving only the shell.

"I'll depend on that," Morgan said, rising. "Broad may not cut quite as wide a swath in another month or two as he does now."

"Time is a great sea washin in around us," Purdy murmured. "We'll see how well Broad has built his walls. And Morgan, if yuh're goin' out to Turkey Track, watch this man Flint. Wounded pride can make even a coward dangerous."

XII

A FAMILIAR sight greeted Morgan when he reached the Turkey Track, a sight that reminded him strongly of his Montana cowpunching days, for it was a scene that changed only in detail wherever cows were run. The constant rising dust cloud. The smell of wood smoke from the branding fire. Loops snaking out. Bawling calves and bawling cows.

It was a sort of organized chaos. Half a dozen Turkey Track irons in the fire. The rush of smoke as a hot iron burned through hair and into flesh. The smell of it, the smell of blood as knives flashed. Turkey Track run on the left side. Underbit off both ears.

"Rafter L from Dry Lake!" a buckaroo yelled.

"Nothin' but Turkey Track on this range!" Broad Clancy shouted arrogantly. "Put the iron on him."

Smell and sweat, pain and blood, dust and smoke, and over all of it that never-dying bawl of worried cows and scared calves, curses, and Broad Clancy's taunting laugh if a rope missed. Throw him. Burn and cut him. Hot iron and steel blade. Drag up another. The cycle repeated until a buckaroo yelled, "This is the one we want."

"I don't want him. Looks just like the last one to me."

"Shore. It is the last one."

Dusty, sweating faces grinning as men stretched and wiped sleeves across cracked-lipped mouths. Somebody kicking out the fires. Cleaning the irons by running them through the dust. Heads sloshed into troughs to come out snorting. Spitting water that was close to mud. A good job well done. Pride here among these knights of gun and horse.

Morgan, watching from the fringe of activity, understood and smiled. He would feel the same as Broad Clancy if he were in Clancy's boots. It was an old scene to Clancy, one that had been repeated every spring since he had rid-

den north from California with his herd. Today he had viewed it for the last time, if Morgan's plans went unchallenged.

If Morgan had been seen no one gave the slightest hint. Riders were hazing the cow and calf herd away from the corrals. Broad Clancy, riding a chestnut gelding as only a man can ride who is a cowman born, grinned at young Rip and said something Morgan didn't hear. He motioned to Short John and Jaggers Flint and, as if by previous agreement, the four reined their horses toward Morgan and rode directly to him.

Morgan had remained away from Clancy because he knew that as long as the branding was going on, the little man wouldn't talk. He had been waiting until he found the moment that seemed to be the right one, thinking they had been too busy to note his arrival. Now he knew he had been seen from the first and ignored, a common treatment Clancy prescribed for unwanted guests, exactly as he had prescribed it for Morgan that first day in the Silver Spur.

Morgan had not come with the intention of fighting. He had avoided it in Irish Bend only by a show of toughness, but young Rip hadn't been there that day, and Rip was the most dangerous man old Broad had. Now, watching them come at him, Morgan had a moment of doubt. Triumph was on Rip's ugly face. Short John, out of place in this tough company, was afraid. Jaggers Flint's muddy brown eyes held the smoldering rage of a man who lacked the cold courage it took to make a play, and hated himself for that failing.

But it was Broad John who surprised Morgan most. He reined up a dozen steps from Morgan, green eyes smiling from under the bushy gold-brown brows. He had shown a nervous fear that day in the Silver Spur when he had learned Morgan's name. He had not wanted to know Morgan's purpose in coming, assuming it was revenge.

Perhaps he had never forgotten the Morgan kid who had left the valley sixteen years before. It might have been that his mind had held the shadowy fear of the boy's return, and he had been shocked by that fear when he discovered that the thing he had been afraid of had become stark reality, instead of a black dread held in the recesses of his mind.

Today Broad Clancy was a different man. Morgan saw no fear in him. There was pride, the dignity of a small man who feels his position, the old arrogance that Morgan had remembered most of all about him. He seemed entirely sure of himself and his own future, as if Murdo Morgan was nothing more than a bothersome gadfly that could be swept away with a motion of his hand.

"We're busy, Morgan," Clancy said crisply. "What do yuh want?"

"Trouble," Rip breathed. "Let's give him some."

"Shut up," Broad ordered. "Speak yore piece, Morgan. Then get off Turkey Track range. This is wrong ground for you."

RIP was a stick of dynamite, a short fuse sparking. He was the one of the four to watch. Jaggers Flint was the next, but Flint would not start it. Short John wanted none of the trouble, and old Broad, for some reason Morgan did not understand, was filled with a confidence that his position did not warrant.

That was the way Morgan read it, and he hesitated a moment, uncertain what his own play would be. He could beat Rip to the draw and kill him. He was certain of that and he was equally certain that if it happened, he would lose the last slim chance of a compromise peace.

"Rip's on the prod," Morgan said at last. "If he pulls his iron and starts smokin', I'll kill him, but that ain't what I want."

"Behave, Rip!" Clancy bawled imperiously, without looking at the boy. "Talk, Morgan. Cuss it, I haven't got all day to set here."

"You said I was on wrong ground," Morgan said evenly, keeping Rip within range of his vision. "It so happens I'm on my own ground."

Broad Clancy threw back his oversized head and laughed. It was a deep laugh, as if this was a moment to savor, to be enjoyed to the last full second.

"Look, Morgan," he said at last when he could talk, "yuh surprised me the other day in town. When yuh said yore name was Morgan, I naturally figgered yuh'd come back to square up for what happened to yore brothers. Since then I've learned different. I know why yuh're here, and yuh don't scare me worth a hoot. I'll tell yuh why. Yuh haven't got the chance of a snowstorm in Hades of pullin' this off. The Citizens' Bank will close yuh out, and I'll deal with them. . . . That all yuh've got to say?"

Questions prodded Morgan's mind. Clancy knew about the Citizens' Bank, so he must have found out through Cole. But what was back of it? There was no time to consider it now.

"Not quite all, Clancy," he said. "Yuh've made a lot of money off a range that never belonged to yuh. I'll give yuh whatever credit yuh've got comin' for fightin' Piutes and the other troubles yuh had, but those days are gone. Yuh'd be—"

"We're still here," Clancy cut in tauntingly. "One blasted company or another has owned the wagon road grant for years, but my cows keep on eatin' company grass. I haven't paid a nickel for it and I never will. Now get out!"

"Not yet," Morgan breathed. "I had hoped to make a deal with yuh. I want everything cleared up before the settlers start comin' in. If yuh want to buy the tract yore buildin's are on—"

"Save yore breath," Clancy jeered. "I'll hold a patent to every acre of company land before I'm done."

"Yuh've had yore chance," Morgan said harshly. "Yuh can save part of the Turkey Track or yuh can lose it."

"I'll save all of it and I'll bust you!" Suddenly Broad Clancy was deadly serious, the last trace of good humor fading from his wrinkled face. His eyes were emerald slits, the corners of his mouth working under the stress of emotion. "I let yuh alone after our ruckus in town because I thought yuh had sense enough to slope out. Now I can see yuh're short of savvy. Yuh figger yuh're a tough hand. Yuh got the jump on Rip at Royce's place, and yuh licked Arch Blazer. All right. Yuh've used up yore luck. Get out of the valley, or by the eternal I'll hang yuh with my own hands before I'm done!"

"There is such a thing as law," Morgan flung at him. "That law recognizes the right of private property. You ain't as big as the law!"

But no one was listening. Broad and Short John had ridden off after the herd. Rip's prodding laugh cut into Morgan's words. Then he and Jaggers Flint wheeled their horses toward the house.

There was no regret in Murdo Morgan as he sat staring after Broad Clancy and Short John. He had done all he could. Clancy's ears were stone.

But why was he so supremely confident? The only answer lay in his certainty of Morgan's failure, and he must have a better reason for that certainty than his belief in himself. Again Morgan considered Ed Cole, but failed to find the answer to his question.

MORGAN smoked a cigarette, sitting his saddle there by the corrals. There was no sign of life about the big log-and-stone house. Rip and Flint had disappeared.

Morgan thought of Jewell Clancy. She had offered to help. She was the only one of the Clancys who had foreseen the inevitable pressure of time and what it would do to the Turkey Track. He reined his black toward the house. Since he was here he might as well see Jewell.

Morgan had seen the Clancy house only at a distance. Now that he was here in front of it, he felt his admiration for it. Broad Clancy, coldly self-confident, had picked the spot beside a spring where he had wanted to build years before. The fact that it was company land and not open to entry had made no difference to him. Yet he had built well. Morgan, who had seen ranchhouses from the Yellowstone to the Rio

Grande, had never seen a better one.

Tying his horse at the pole beyond the row of Lombardy poplars, Morgan's gaze swept the house. It was east of the bunkhouse and cookshack. The barns and corrals were across the road and a short distance to the south. From the wide porch the Clancys could look across the sage-floored valley to the pine hills and the sharp point of Clancy Mountain. Old Broad had named the peak. It had been his boast that he stood out among men the way Clancy Mountain stood out above the rolling hills.

The house was of stone, two stories high, the wings on both sides of lodgepole pine. There was no yard, but there was a row of red hollyhocks along the front of the house. Jewell's work, Morgan thought, an expression of a woman's love of beauty, the same as the yard in front of the Royce cabin was a mark of Peg's character.

Morgan crossed the porch and knocked. The door was open and he could look into the big living room with its tremendous stone fireplace on the opposite wall. Bear skins were on the floor, there was a scattering of homemade furniture, including a sort of divan covered with Navajo blankets, and a collection of firearms on the wall. A man's place, yet clearly marked by a woman.

There was no sound within the cool gloom of the interior. Morgan knocked again, louder this time. He heard the pad of feet and the Chinese cook shuffled into the room.

"Is Miss Jewell here?" Morgan asked.

"Missy out liding," the Chinese answered. "Back velly soon. You come in?"

Morgan nodded and stepped in. The Chinese pattered on across the room and disappeared.

Morgan twisted a smoke, his gaze swinging around the room. A huge picture within a carved walnut frame hung above the fireplace. Broad Clancy's and his wife's wedding picture, Morgan guessed. He had never seen Mrs. Clancy, but now, studying her face, he felt he would not have liked her. Lips too thin, too tightly pressed.

He grinned when he looked at Broad's picture. Young, with a long curling mustache, the gold-brown brows not so bushy then, and hair. Plenty of it. But Broad didn't look entirely happy. Sort of disappointed, Morgan told himself.

Morgan's grin widened. Maybe the picture had been taken after they'd been married.

Morgan swung around the room. There were other pictures, mostly of the children, but the one in the little office at the end of the long living room shocked him. The door into the office was open. On the wall above the desk was a picture that was startlingly familiar, so familiar that he thought for a moment it was his own mother. Then he wondered if it could have been her sister.

Taking the tintype of his mother from his pocket, Morgan studied it, then lifted his gaze to the picture on the wall. They were so alike it was fantastic. The only difference was a matter of age. The wall picture was that of a younger woman, hardly more than a girl.

A squeak on the floor brought Morgan around, the tintype still in his right hand. In that way he was disarmed, a fact that saved his life. The slightest motion for his gun would have brought death. Rip Clancy stood there, a cocked Colt in his hand, his thin face utterly wicked.

"I've been waitin' for this ever since yuh got lucky that day at Peg's place," Rip said, with taunting malice. "Yuh ain't as smart as Pap figgers, or yuh wouldn't have stepped into it."

Jaggers Flint took a step forward until he stood beside Rip.

"I'll take care of him, Rip," he said. "I've done a little waitin', too."

But a vicious cunning had seized Rip.

"Not yet, Jaggers," he said. "Tie him up. Before we're done with him, he'll make a swap, his land for his life."

"Broad's got some fool notions about how to treat anybody while he's in yore house," Flint objected. "He ain't goin' to like this. Let's take this huckleberry and dust out of here."

"Pap'll change his mind."

The sound of a horse's hoofs silenced Rip. He wheeled toward the door.

"It's Jewell!" he cried. "Tie Morgan up and dump him into my room. She won't go in there."

XIII

JEWELL had seen Murdo Morgan ride up to the branding when she was saddling her brown mare. She had hesitated, wondering what had brought him to the Turkey Track, and knowing the answer at once. This visit had been inevitable from the moment her father had refused to listen to Morgan in town.

For a moment Jewell had stood motionless beside the mare, watching Morgan sit his saddle outside the circle of activity. There might be trouble and it was not in her power to prevent it. Mounting, she had turned her mare toward the rimrock that formed the north wall of the valley.

She rode well, with the easy rhythm of one who had sat in leather before she could walk. A hot, dry wind thrust at her and brought her hair down her back and, catching it, straightened it out behind her, a filmy gold-bright mass in the sun.

Jewell knew every trail and road in the valley, in the pine hills to the south, in the Sunset Mountains to the west. Nature had endowed her with a throbbing restlessness that daily drove her out of the gloomy house and into the open where the air was thin and clear and pure. She had never understood it, but when the wind gave her its wings and the sunlight painted a distant and beautiful world beyond the far edges of the valley, when the strong sage smell was all around her and the sky was the only roof above her, the restlessness was gone entirely.

This was her land, and she was its child. But there were the passions of her family to mar perfection. The hidden fears, the huge pride, the false-rooted arrogance—all united to build a shame in her and wrench a protest from her that was wasted.

Usually Jewell rode to the rimrock and worked her way to the top along the snake-wide trail, but not today. She was remembering Ed Cole's visit, her father's grim laugh and growing sureness. Then she remembered Murdo Morgan, tall and square-built, a dark-faced, black-garbed man with a dream greater than any Clancy had ever dreamed.

The old conflict boiled within her again, loyalty to a family she did not respect and did not understand, against the loyalty to a man she had met only briefly, the man whose dream had been her own unspoken dream, the man who, as a boy, had been in her thoughts through her growing years.

She reined up in the talus and stepped down. She idled among the boulders, her gaze sweeping across the gray flat to the pine hills, made hazy blue by the distance. There, standing as a memorial the Creator had made, was Clancy Mountain. Broad Clancy had committed sacrilege in stealing it.

Jewell had always been honest with herself. She knew how little love Broad Clancy had for her, but she did feel a closeness with Short John that she felt with neither Rip nor their father. There was one thing in common between them. They were out of place, tolerated rather than loved. Broad Clancy poured his affection on Rip, seeing in his youngest child much that was in himself. He didn't understand Jewell because he didn't understand women, and Short John wasn't tough enough for the position life had given him.

Jewell sat down, hands behind her, eyes on Clancy Mountain. Suddenly she realized, and the knowledge shocked her, that she hated the mountain. Beautiful. Symmetrical. Snow-covered until late spring. A sharp arrow pointing to heaven. She should love it because she loved everything that was beautiful, but she didn't.

Abel Purdy had said in a rare burst of frankness that time would consume all of them except old Broad, but the mountain would never allow him to be forgotten. It would be there as long as the earth itself was here.

In that moment Jewell made her decision. If Morgan died today, her hopes

died with him. If he lived, he would have whatever help she could give him. Then, with a swift rush of panic, she realized she should have stayed at the branding. She might have prevented his dying.

She mounted and put her mare at a fast pace back across the valley. The branding was finished. Everyone was gone, but Morgan's big black stood in front of the house.

JEWELL ran inside. Morgan must be here. He would never leave his horse.

The front room was empty. Disappointment knifed her. She had hoped to find him waiting. Then she saw Rip in the office.

"Where's Morgan?" she called.

"Morgan?" Rip took his boots off the spur-scarred desk and stood up. "How the devil should I know?"

"His horse is in front."

"Which same don't prove a thing," Rip said irritably. "Mebbe he left his nag and took one of ours. If he did, we'll shore hang him for hoss stealin'."

That was about as unreasonable a thing as Rip could say. There wasn't an animal on Turkey Track except Flint's sorrel that compared with Morgan's black, but Jewell chose not to press the point.

"You didn't have trouble?" she asked.

Rip laughed jeeringly. "Trouble with that big wind? 'Course not! He had something to say about Pap buying land, but Pap told him he'd dicker with the Citizens' Bank when the sign was right, like Cole said." He moved to the door. "I'll go look for that hairpin if yuh want to see him." His face suddenly turned ugly. "Say, you ain't sweet on him, are yuh?"

"I don't want him killed. There's enough Morgan blood on Clancy hands now without adding his."

Rip jeered another laugh. "I reckon there'll be some more 'fore long. Pap should have knowed that pup would grow into a wolf. Now we've got the wolf to kill."

Jewell watched Rip cross to the barn, questions thrusting themselves at her. Turning, her gaze swept the room. Morgan was here, somewhere. Maybe in the barn. Maybe Rip was going to kill him now. She ran upstairs for her gun. Then, in the hall outside the door to Rip's room, she saw Morgan's black Stetson.

Usually Jaggers Flint was with Rip, but she hadn't seen the gunman when she'd come in. She turned into her room and lifted her short-barreled revolver from the bureau drawer. She saw her hunting knife and, on second thought, took it. Jewell Clancy had never killed a man in her life, but she would now if that was what it took to free Morgan.

Then a thought paralyzed her with shock. That man might be her brother Rip!

Jewell slipped the knife into the waistband of her levis and left her room, a cold purpose ruling her. She moved with cat-quiet along the hall, her gun cocked. There was a law in the Clancy house that a bedroom was never entered except upon invitation of its occupant, but Jewell didn't hesitate.

Gripping the knob of Rip's door, she turned it slowly and shoved the door open with a violent push. She expected to see Jaggers Flint there and she expected to kill him, but the gunman was not in sight. Morgan was on the floor, hands and feet tied, a bandanna gagging him.

For a moment the room turned in front of Jewell. She gripped the foot of Rip's bed, shutting her eyes, faintly aware of an incoherent gurgle from Morgan. She had been keyed to a killing, and now that the killing was not necessary, she stood trembling, tears struggling to break through. Then she gained control of herself, eased down the hammer of her gun and, lifting the knife from her waistband, slashed Morgan's ropes and gag.

He licked dry lips and flexed the muscles of his wrists.

"I'm beholden to yuh," he began.

"Not here." She gripped his hand and pulled him to the door. "Rip will tear the house down when he finds you've gone."

Morgan was in the hall then, picking

up his Stetson.

"Careless of Flint to drop it here," he said.

"Flint isn't smart and he was in a hurry, but I'd have found you anyhow. I got back sooner than Rip expected and saw your horse outside." Jewell opened the door of her room and pulled Morgan into it, smiling at his disapproving frown. "A woman's room is no different than any other room, Murdo. Just four walls."

"If Rip found me in here, he'd have some reason to drill me."

"He won't find you," she said, hoping Rip would respect the rule she had not. "This is my one island of refuge."

HE STOOD rubbing his wrists, eyes on her. He was, she thought, tough enough to finish this job he had started. This was a world of violent action and brutal force, of blood and dust and sweat. Murdo Morgan fitted that world but, more than that, he had the capacity to adapt himself to any situation. If he survived, there would be another world of quiet and order here in Paradise Valley, a world of turned furrows and filled irrigation ditches and churches and schools. He would fit into that world, too.

"I don't savvy Broad," Morgan said. "He was plumb jumpy when I saw him in town. Wouldn't listen. Just wanted me to get out or get plugged in the back. Today he acted like he had the world by the tail."

"Ed Cole and Pete Royce paid us a visit," Jewell said quietly. "Dad knows why you're here."

"Cole and Royce?" Morgan started to reach for tobacco and paper. Then his hand fell away from his shirt pocket. "What did they want?"

"Cole told Dad that you owned the road grant and had borrowed money from the Citizens' Bank. He said the land was being sold in the Middle West now."

Morgan walked to the window and looked out upon the sage flat, the afternoon sunlight cutting strongly across his face.

"Why did Cole tell Broad that?" he asked in a wondering voice.

"His bank wants the valley and he thinks this is a cheap way to get it. If you fail, the bank will close you out, and he said he knew how to make you fail, but if his plans didn't work, he wanted Dad to help."

"What's in it for Broad?"

"Cole promised to see that Dad got title to the land he needed in return for helping break you."

She saw the misery that was in him, saw it tighten his mouth and narrow his eyes, saw the beat of his temple pulse. Ed Cole had bragged that Morgan was a trusting fool who wouldn't suspect him because they were friends, and she sensed the hurt that was in Morgan. He was the kind of man who would give everything to a friend and, for that same reason, expected the best from those he called friends.

Jewell stood at the door, watching him and saying nothing, knowing that he had to work this out with himself. He had, she thought, expected trouble with some of the nesters like Pete Royce. He would have expected trouble with the Turkey Track, but he would not have anticipated this fight with the man who had negotiated his loan and called it an act of friendship.

Morgan turned suddenly to face her. "I came to the house to see you, but I guess there ain't anything yuh can do. Long as Broad figgers he's got me on the run, none of us can do anything. I might as well drift."

"You can't go now!" she cried. "Flint and Rip are outside and you haven't got your gun. Wait till dark. I'll find your horse and you can go out through this window."

He gave her a queer grin that might have meant anything. "I've been in some tights that looked pretty tough, but I never saw one so tough I had to sneak out through a woman's window."

Crazy, but that was the way Murdo Morgan *would* feel. She moved quickly to stand against the door, searching for something that would make him stay.

"How did Rip happen to get the drop on you?" she asked.

He was halfway across the room when

she asked that. He stopped as if suddenly remembering something.

"I was lookin' at a picture on the wall of Broad's office. She looked a lot like my mother."

"She was your mother," Jewell said quietly.

He rubbed the back of his neck, staring blankly at her while his mind grappled with what she had said.

"How did Broad get it?" he asked.

"I told you there were two sides to this thing," she said. "Dad loved your mother in California, but your father won her. Dad never forgave him. He married right after that, but he didn't love my mother. They quarreled all the time. That's about all I remember of her."

"Then that's the reason Broad and Dad hated each other."

"Most of it. The rest was Dad thinking your father came here to flaunt his victory. Dad left California to get away from the Morgans and try to forget your mother."

Outside a man called:

"Where's Morgan?"

MORGAN wheeled to the window, with Jewell a step behind him. Tom Carrick stood there with the sun to his back, slim and arrow-straight, hand splayed over gun butt. Rip stepped out of the house and paced slowly toward Tom. Jewell gripped Morgan's arm. She sensed what was coming, and she knew Morgan did.

"The fool!" Morgan breathed. "Had to keep lookin' for his trouble till he found it."

"What do yuh want Morgan for, yuh yellow-livered clodbuster?" Rip called tauntingly.

"Don't call me yellow!" Tom Carrick bellowed. "There's Morgan's hoss. Abel Purdy said he was comin' out here."

Morgan tried to raise the window, but it was solid. Jewell handed him her gun. He took it and wheeled toward the door, but it was too late. Rip had pulled his Colt, confident of his superiority over this brash nester.

Jewell opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came. Something gripped her throat. Rip had made the wrong guess. Tom Carrick's gun spoke before Rip's was clear of leather and Rip Clancy, his Colt unfired, folded into the hoof-churned dust.

Morgan whirled back to the window when he heard the shot. That was when Jaggers Flint, shooting from the barn across the road, cut Tom Carrick down with a shot in the back!

XIV

KICKING out the window, Morgan had Jewell's small gun in his big fist.

"Stand where yuh are, Flint!" he shouted. "Yuh'll hang for killin'!"

Jewell glimpsed the gunman's upturned face, squeezed tight with the panic that Morgan's voice had stirred in him. He tilted his gun and fired.

Morgan pushed Jewell away. She fell across the bed and, coming back to her feet, saw the splintered slice that Flint's bullet had made along the edge of the window casing. She heard her gun in Morgan's hand, and smelled the burned powder.

Morgan wheeled out of the room.

"Stay here!" he called. "I'll get Flint!"

She came back to the window just as Flint swung aboard his sorrel and broke out of the ranchyard in a wild run. She heard Morgan pound down the stairs and across the living room, heard her gun talk again, and saw that he had missed. Morgan stooped beside Rip, felt of his wrist and, seeing his gun in the dead man's waistband, lifted it and slid it into holster. He knelt at Carrick's side and, turning, waved for Jewell to stay inside. She knew then that both were dead.

"Flint will head for the lava flow!" Jewell screamed.

She didn't wait for Morgan to ask where it was. She walked out of the room, slowly, her legs stiff and without feeling, an emptiness in her. When she reached the front porch, Morgan was in his saddle and cracking steel to his horse.

Jewell stood watching him, worry a sharp pain in her chest. She knew that

only one would come back. Then she moved off the porch and through the dust to Rip. Oddly enough, her thoughts fastened upon her father. She wondered what he would do now that Rip was dead. . . .

Morgan pulled his black down after the first hundred yards. Flint's horse was faster, but at the reckless pace the killer was taking, he would kill the sorrel. There would be time then for the reckoning.

They reached the rim, the distance steadily increasing between them, and crossed the plateau between the foothills and the valley. The sun was behind Sunset Mountains then, and by the time they reached the fringe of timber, black night gripped the mountains. Morgan swore bitterly. He had been sure his horse could overtake the sorrel, but Flint had disappeared in the scattering pines that seemed to stretch endlessly ahead.

The big black was more important to Morgan than Flint. No horse, not even the sorrel, could take many hours like these. Somewhere ahead of him, perhaps in the lava flow, Flint would be on foot. Morgan knowing that time was on his side, reined up.

Making camp in the protection of a fifty-foot cliff, he waited out the long night.

This was strange country to Morgan. He had come into the valley several miles to the north. He had heard of the lava flow when he was a kid, but knew where it was only in a general way. It would be, he knew, a perfect place for a hideout, filled with caves and steep-walled depressions where a man could hide and wait for his pursuer.

That would be Flint's way—the way he had killed Tom Carrick. With the thought hatred gripped Murdo Morgan. There would be no turning back until Jaggers Flint was dead.

Daylight showed gray, then sharply red, shadows reluctantly fading from the hills and draws. Hawk's Nest, a rugged point of rock that Morgan had seen from the valley, rose above the gently sloping hills and made an unmistakable landmark ahead of him. The lava flow was not far beyond.

Morgan saddled and rode west, slowly now, for he was sure the sorrel could not have gone much farther. A sense of danger made a growing uneasiness in him. What Flint did depended on how panicky he had become, but unless he completely lost his head, he would hole up and ambush Morgan. His kind of killer seldom changed.

Sunlight crawled along the hillsides and down into the draws, and slowly warmed, baking the chill of the long night out of Morgan's muscles. The lava flow loomed ahead, a black, twisting ridge that had been spewed out of some nearby crater in prehistoric times as a savage molten mass. Cooling, it had formed this nearly lifeless desert in which only a few stunted trees found precarious footing.

FLINT was close! The nearness of his presence sent a warning impulse along Morgan's nerves. He drew his Colt his eyes scanning the lava. A million places along that ragged ridge where the gunman could hide while he laid his sights on the man he wanted to kill.

Something had warned Morgan and his mind sought the source of that warning. It might have been the chattering of a squirrel or a jay, or a deer bounding through the timber. Then he caught it, the faint reflection of the sun on a rifle barrel poked through a hole in the lava ahead of him.

Morgan went out of his saddle in a long leap, trying for a pine to his left. He heard the rifle, heard the snap of the bullet, and lunged for the tree. The second bullet got him in the shoulder and knocked him flat. Flint should have killed him then, and would have if his third shot had been less hurried. As it was the slug kicked up dirt and pine needles just beyond Morgan's head. He fell into a depression behind the tree and for the moment was out of Flint's sight.

Morgan pulled breath into his aching lungs, a little sick with the realization that death had missed by inches. Then

he felt the blood from his shoulder wound and knew the sickness had a more tangible cause than relief.

Boots scraped on the lava. Rocks loosened by a man's feet clattered down the steep slope. Flint was coming after him! Morgan's first thought was that Flint's action was utterly senseless. Flint would be smart to ride on.

Morgan eared back the hammer of his gun, ears keened for sound of the man's movements. Then he understood. Flint was going downslope toward Morgan's horse.

Morgan struggled upright, swaying uncertainly until he laid the point of a shoulder against the trunk. Flint, hurrying toward the black, did not see him. "Turn around, Flint!" Morgan called.

The gunman must have thought he had killed Morgan or had at least hit him hard enough to take him out of the fight. He wheeled, shocked into immobility, lips parted as he stared at Morgan. He dug for his gun, lunging forward in a wild leap. He got in one shot, a hurried desperate one, far wide of its mark.

Morgan's first bullet knocked him off his feet. Flint fought back to his knees and tilted his gun. Morgan fired a second time. Flint's body gave with the impact of the heavy slug. He went flat, the power of self-movement forever gone from him.

The hillside seemed to buckle before Morgan's eyes. He dropped his gun and clutched the pine trunk for support. Then his fingers gave and he fell, his blood forming a slowly spreading stain on his shirt, shoulder aching with steady hammering throbs.

Morgan lay there a moment, an inner warning beating along his spine When he tried to get up, he found that his left arm was useless. He realized vaguely that he had to stop the blood, and worked his bandanna out of his pocket. Rolling it into a ball, he slid it inside his shirt against the wound. He lay there a moment, gritting his teeth against the pain that was rocketing through his body.

The warning still tugged at his foggy consciousness. Then he knew what it was. Horses! Coming upslope. He picked up his gun and fumbled two loads into the cylinder. Old Broad and some of his men probably. He lay with his back against the side of the depression, trying to hold his gun steady, and knew it was no use. He couldn't hit anybody if he had a shotgun.

"Murdo!"

It was Jewell Clancy's voice. He didn't try to understand why she was here. He accepted the fact that she was.

"Here!" He tried to shout, but the word came from his throat in a hoarse whisper.

He heard her steps then, saw her looking down at him, her face grave with concern. He tried to get up, but the world was falling apart. Her words, "Quick, Doc!" seemed to come from a great distance and he fell sideward into an aching void that was without bottom. . . .

IT WAS dark when Morgan came to. He lay motionless for a time, aware of a throbbing pain, of thirst. He tried to remember what had happened. It came to him slowly, but he wasn't sure whether it had happened in reality or in a nightmare.

Time made a slow unmeasured passage. "Jewell!" he called.

He heard her come to him, felt her cool hand on his forehead. She made him swallow something, and he fell back and was asleep again.

They were strange, weird days. He twisted in a fever, found Jewell beside him when he called to her. Sometimes Doc Velie was there. Days and nights were the same. He dreamed, wild aching dreams that always held a monster called FAILURE. Broad Clancy had won!

Slowly reason returned and the world settled back into reality. Jewell told him she had brought Doc Velie from town and they had hidden in a cave

while Clancy and his men searched, Clancy believing that Morgan had killed Rip.

"I guess nobody knows about this cave but me," Jewell said. "I come here lots of times. Stay overnight when I can't stand home any more. That's why I always kept food here. We won't starve, Murdo."

He lay looking at her, weak, but not so weak he couldn't admire her, even here in the gloom of the cave. He owed her his life, but he could do no better than say:

"I'm beholden to yuh."

"If you do what you plan, Murdo," she said, "I'll be beholden to you."

"You're Broad Clancy's girl—" he began.

"I can't help where life put me," she said bitterly, "but I can help staying there. I've talked to Doc and Abel Purdy and some of the others. They hate Dad, and they hate what he's done, and what he's doing to the valley, but Doc's the only one who has the courage to tell him. I think Purdy will some day. He says the valley could support hundreds of families and that's the way it will be. That's the dream I've had, Murdo. I guess Purdy gave it to me. Or maybe I couldn't forget the day you and your father left because of what Dad had done. I was just a little girl, but it made too deep an impression for me ever to forget it."

"Looks like we dream the same kind of dreams," Morgan said. "Broad had his chance, but he wouldn't take it."

"He isn't big enough to deal with a Morgan," Jewell said, "and he isn't a man to settle for half. When it's over with, he'll still run the valley or he'll be dead." She rose and looked down at Morgan, troubled. "Don't judge all the Clancys by Dad," she said, and went out for wood.

Velie came after dark and when he had finished examining Morgan he said with satisfaction:

"Tough as a boot heel, Morgan. You'll come through in good shape if you've got enough sense to listen to me."

"Don't know 'bout that," Morgan said.

"Then you'll be dead," Velie snapped. "I've got a letter for you that I took the liberty of opening. In case you didn't know it, I'd like to see this land sale come off the way it ought to. No sense of Broad Clancy acting like he was a combination of man, Creator and devil. I want him trimmed down."

"Read the letter," Morgan said.

"It's from a gent named Grant Gardner. Says here, 'Dear Morgan. I am glad to report that the sale of your land is progressing faster than we could reasonably expect. I can safely promise that every contract will be sold by August first. I will be in Irish Bend within a few weeks and we will make definite plans at that time for the drawing. If you want me to, I'll take charge of the details, since it was an old story to me. As a matter of fact, I have already given orders for my men to be in Irish Bend in time to get everything set up before the first of September. There will be nothing for you to do but see that the peace is kept.' "

XV

VELIE laid the letter down. He kicked more wood on the fire. He looked at Morgan and cleared his throat.

"Son, I don't know all that's going on," he said bluntly, "but I do know that keeping the peace is going to be a big chore."

"Go on," said Morgan. "What else does the letter say?" Doc Velie picked it up, and went on reading:

" 'I am happy to say that I am much more optimistic about the success of your venture than I was at the time we talked in my office. One reason for my optimism is our unprecedented success in selling your contracts. That can be accounted for by several dry years and the resulting crop failures in much of the Middle West. The second is your own record. I have checked it thoroughly. Even if this project fails, I hope you will consider a job with my

organization. Cordially, Grant Gardner.' " Velie raised his eyes from the paper. "Who is this Gardner?"

"A millionaire a few times over. If he likes the valley he'll build a system of ditches and reservoirs for us."

"Then we'd better make him like the valley. Now get this straight, Morgan. You're well enough to take care of yourself. Jewell had better go back with me. Broad's in town, catching up on his sleep and taking on more supplies. If Jewell shows up, he'll think you're dead or she couldn't find you. Then he'll call off his dogs. Jewell knows these hills better than anybody else. If she can't find you, he'll know well enough he can't."

"Shore, I'll get along," Morgan said.

"But Doc—" Jewell began.

"Now shut up!" Velie bellowed. "Listen, Morgan. This is more than your fight. If you lose, things go back the way they've been for years. If you win, this valley can be made the paradise Broad named it for. You go back in a few days and you don't live ten minutes."

"I reckon I won't be goin' back right away," Morgan admitted.

"I mean for you to make yourself scarce till the middle of August. I wrote to Gardner to hustle up here. Told him you'd been shot. He can do everything that needs to be done, can't he?"

"Yes, but—"

"No buts. He said your job was to keep the peace. All right. It'll take a well man to keep the peace in this valley when the settlers start rolling in. You won't have your strength before the middle of August. Maybe not then."

Morgan rubbed a stubble-dark cheek, knowing that what Velie said was right, and at the same time feeling the pressure of his pride.

"I've got to see Jim," he muttered. "I let Tom get killed."

"No, you didn't!" Jewell cried. "You were gone from the window when it happened. Rip drew first."

"I should have hollered to him," Morgan said bitterly.

"It wouldn't have made any difference. Flint was behind him. He'd have shot Carrick in the back no matter what you did."

"They had Tom whipsawed all right," Morgan said. "You tell Jim, will yuh?"

"I've already told him," Velie said. "I've told him where you are, and how bad off you've been. Now are you going to promise you'll stay out of the valley, or am I going to have to send Jim up here to make you stay?"

"I'll stay," Morgan murmured. He brought his gaze to Jewell's face, troubled by the knowledge that Broad Clancy had built a wall between them. "No way out of it. Mebbe me and Broad are both wrong. If it works out so Broad—"

He stopped, failing to find the words he wanted, but Jewell nodded as if she knew what he wanted to say.

"You've got to win, Murdo. I won't apologize for Dad, and I know he won't change. Do what you have to do. . . ."

MORGAN rode back into Irish Bend before the middle of August, the uncertainty of what was happening and the pressure of what had to be done driving him into action. His wound was healed, the soreness gone and strength was back in his whip-muscled body. Yet there was a difference in him that went deeper than the beard covering his face and the hungry leanness that gave his features a mild resemblance to those of a brooding hawk.

He was a forward-looking man, never one to waste time in regrets. Still, Tom Carrick's death weighed heavily upon him, a weight that the killing of Jaggers Flint had not removed.

Racking his black in front of the barber shop, Morgan had a shave and haircut and sent the barber to the store for a new shirt while he had a bath. He was not certain whether the barber knew him or not, but the man was coolly distant, so he thought he had been recognized.

It was no different now, and it

wouldn't be until they saw that Clancy was beaten. Then Murdo Morgan would have friends. Dozens of them.

Morgan was leaning back in the zinc tub lathering his long body when he heard steps cross the barber shop toward the back room. The word was out that he was in town. He had left his gun-belt over a chair within easy reach, an instinctive precaution that he had taken without thought.

He lifted his Colt from holster, soapy thumb slipping on the heavy hammer as he tried to cock the gun. He cursed, wiped his hand on the towel, and had the hammer pronged back when the door opened.

It was Doc Velie and Grant Gardner.

"A fine note when a man can't take a bath without being busted in on, ain't it?" Velie asked complacently.

Gardner paused in the doorway, suddenly embarrassed as if, in his anxiety to see Morgan, he had not thought how it would be. Morgan grinned.

"Howdy, Doc." Letting down the hammer, he laid his gun on the chair and held out a wet hand. "Howdy, Gardner."

"A fine note when a man greets his friends with a cocked gun, too," Velie complained. "Ain't it, Gardner?"

"From what I've seen since I got to Paradise Valley," Gardner said soberly, "I'd say it was a good idea to greet anybody with a gun until you know who it is."

Morgan laid his gaze on the capitalist's face. "What's happened?"

"Nothing," Velie said quickly. "Broad decided you're dead. Jewell had a row with him and moved to the hotel, but he's got a man watching her. That's why she didn't come out to see you."

Gardner lifted a cigar from his pocket. "I'm used to situations like this. Fact is, I've had to do a little fighting on my own hook when I started carving up a cowman's range." He fished in his pocket for a match. "But this one's the toughest deal I've been on. You're still on top, Morgan, but a man's luck doesn't last forever."

"A man makes his own luck," Morgan said. "I'll make mine. Like yuh said in yore letter. My job is to keep the peace."

"And a tough job it is with most of it still ahead of you," Gardner murmured. "Mine's about finished. Every contract's been sold. Next week we'll put up the big tent and we'll have a field kitchen for the settlers who aren't equipped to cook their own meals. The hotel is far from adequate, so we'll have to put up another tent for them to sleep in."

"Springs and mattresses, I reckon," Velie grunted.

Gardner waited until he had his cigar going. "Hay on the ground and they'll be glad to get it. There is another problem, Morgan. Whenever you get a crowd like we're going to have, you get a number of drifters and gamblers who have to be handled. I have a feeling you'll be busy enough without taking care of the riff-raff."

"There's a lawman here named Purdy," Morgan said.

Velie snorted. "Don't figger on Purdy."

"A little confidence might go a long ways with him," Morgan murmured.

"Purdy thinks too much," Velie growled. "Reading and thinking don't give a man nerve. Confidence don't either."

"We'll try him," Morgan said sharply.

GARDNER shook his head doubtfully.

"The barber's back, Doc," he said. "We'd better let the man dress."

"Nothing's s t o p p i n g him," Velie snapped. He slid exploratory fingers over Morgan's shoulder. "Don't get the idea we came in here because we were so glad to see you. Just professional interest. Mmmm. I did a good job on you. Healed up fine. Surprisin', considering you had to eat your own cooking after Jewell left."

"I didn't stay there all the time. Rode over to Prineville. Then spent some time on the Deschutes."

"Couldn't stay put, could you?" Velie's eyes smoldered with anger. "Well, now that you're back, see if you can stay alive. Blazer and Royce have been hanging around the Elite. Talking about what they'll do to you if you show up. They never did take to the yarn that Flint had tagged you and you'd crawled off to die."

Morgan got out of the tub and reached for the towel. "See yuh later."

Gardner left the room, but Doc Velie paused in the doorway, eyes speculatively on Morgan.

"Shut the door!" Morgan howled.

"Shucks, you're not so pretty," the medico grunted. "I told you Jewell's at the hotel."

"I heard yuh. Shut the door!"

Growling something that didn't reach Morgan as words, Velie slammed the door and left the barber shop.

Morgan dressed and buckled on his gun-belt, thinking with grim reluctance that Gardner had been right in saying the job of keeping the peace was a tough one, and that most of it was still ahead. He wondered how accurate Velie had been in his harsh judgment of Purdy. If the medico was right he, Morgan, was wrong, but if Purdy had even a small part of a man's natural heritage of pride, Murdo Morgan was right and Velie was wrong. He would have to know before the crowd came.

Leaving the barber shop Morgan paced along the front of the saddlery, eyes on the street. It was nearly as deserted as it had been the day he had seen Abel Purdy, but an apparently deserted town could be a dangerous one. Both Royce and Blazer, like Jaggers Flint had been, were the kind of men who would shoot him from a hiding place if they thought the law was too weak to handle them.

By this time the news of Morgan's presence would have swept the town like a prairie fire before a high wind. Pausing in front of the hotel, Morgan remembered there had been two horses racked before the Elite when he had ridden into town. Now the hitchpole was empty. He turned into the lobby, pondering this, but failing to see any danger in the incident.

Jewell was not behind the desk. Disappointment built a gray uneasiness in him. He had not realized until he swung into the dining room how much he had counted on seeing her. When he had eaten he asked for her at the desk.

The clerk eyed him with the same veiled hostility he had sensed in the barber.

"She ain't here, mister. Out ridin', I reckon."

Morgan wheeled out of the lobby. He built a smoke as he moved along the walk to the corner, stopped in front of the Stockman's Bank and, scratching a match across its front, lighted his cigarette. He stood there, considering, tobacco smoke a shifting shape in front of his face. As long as Blazer and Royce were in town, they were as dangerous as a pair of rattlesnakes in a man's bed.

Decision made, Morgan slanted across the intersection to the store, his gaze fixed on the front of the Elite. He had to kill Blazer and Royce or drive them out of the valley. Both claimed to be settlers, and for that reason were capable of doing irreparable damage when the contract holders arrived in Irish Bend.

IT WASN'T until Morgan reached the post office that he saw the newly lettered sign hanging in front of what had been an empty building east of the Elite:

OFFICE OF CASCADE AND PARADISE LAND COMPANY

He grinned as he turned into Purdy's office. Gardner, he thought, was a good man to be running things.

Purdy blinked behind his spectacles. Then he rose and gravely held out his hand.

"Greetin's from a mortal to one in the other world. I understand yuh're dead, with Flint's bullet in yuh."

"It's a lie. The slug went on through."

Purdy laughed and motioned to a chair. "Sit down, Morgan. I'm glad to see yuh."

Morgan shook his head. "I've got business in the Elite. I hear Royce and Blazer are all set for me."

"They've done some wild talkin'," Purdy admitted.

"I'm givin' 'em a chance to show how much is wind, which same brings up another point. Gardner says we'll have some toughs in town when the crowd gets in. Are you goin' to handle 'em?"

It was a blunt question, brutally put. Purdy looked down at his star, holding his answer for a moment. He was afraid. Morgan saw that in the sudden squeeze which fear put upon his features, but instinct did not force a quick refusal from him. His pride, then, was not dead, and Morgan knew his confidence had not been wasted.

"I'll try," Purdy said at last.

"Good." Morgan nodded as if there had never been any doubt. He lifted his gun, checked it, and slid it back into leather. "Come on over to the Elite. Might as well see the fun."

Purdy hesitated, then turned to his desk. Picking up an ancient Navy Colt, he slipped it into his waistband.

"I wouldn't want to miss it," he said.

XVI

DOC VELIE was coming out of the company office as Morgan and Purdy angled across the dust strip toward the Elite. He stared in the way of a man who sees something unreal take the cloak of reality. Then he ducked inside.

They reached the walk, crossed it.

"I just want a fair fight," Morgan said. "See that I get it."

He put a shoulder against the batwings and pushed through, hand on gun butt. Except for the droopy-mouthed barman, the place was empty, but hoof thunder sounded from the alley and faded as distance grew.

"They're not here," Purdy said, as if this evident fact was something he had hoped for but had not expected.

Morgan moved directly to the bar. "Where's Royce and Blazer?"

The barman laid down his towel. "Don't know. They went out of the back door when you two left Purdy's office. Reckon they've made some dust by now."

"I've been in town two hours," Morgan said. "How come they got in such a hurry all of a sudden?"

"They knowed yuh was here," the barman said. "They aimed to gun yuh down the minute yuh showed yore nose in the door, but they got another notion when they saw Purdy. Funny how a star can change a feller's mind."

Morgan grinned at the astounded Purdy. The pale-eyed man had discovered something new concerning the dignity of a lawman's badge.

"We'd better have a drink on that, Abel," Morgan said. "I'm a little put out. I figgered it was me that had them hombres worried."

"Yuh did." The barman set a bottle and glasses on the mahogany. "That was why they wasn't takin' any chances on yuh, but they didn't figger on the law, so they got spooked when they saw Purdy."

Morgan took his drink and jingled a coin on the bar. "See yuh later, Abel," he said, and left the saloon.

The building that housed the company's office had been a store, but the owner had lost an argument to Broad Clancy and left the valley. It had been filled with broken chairs and boxes, a long counter, dirt, and innumerable cobwebs.

Morgan paused in the doorway, amazed by what he saw. The place now was clean, the debris cleared out, and the smell of fresh paint lingered in the air. There were several desks in the front of the room behind a railing that marked a line of demarcation between clerical workers and a waiting room for visitors. Two small office rooms had been built in the back, one marked "Grant Gardner," the other "Murdo Morgan."

Gardner saw Morgan and bustled out of his office.

"Been looking for you. I wanted you to see what we've done."

"Looks fine," Morgan murmured. "Never thought I'd have my name on an office door."

Gardner flushed with evident pleasure. "This is part of my contribution to a worthwhile endeavor, Morgan. I'm no good on the fighting end, but I know this part of the business." He pointed to rows of filing cabinets along the wall. "Duplicate copies of the contracts that have been sold. My office crew will be in from Alturas tomorrow. Lot of work yet for all of us. I want you to go over a map of the road grant with me. We'll mark off the tracts according to the size you want them sold. All this bookkeeping and the cost of taking care of our customers and the traveling expenses for those who represent twenty or more contracts will cut into your profit, but in the long run it will pay."

Gardner swung his hand around the room. "Show stuff, maybe, but it impresses folks. A lot of them will want to come in and talk, and we'll have to take time off. If we can keep them in good humor and hold their confidence, the drawing will go off like clockwork." He opened the door into Morgan's office. "How do you like that?"

A new swivel chair, roll-top desk, brass spittoon on the floor, three chairs. Morgan chuckled and, sitting down at his desk, ran his finger tips across the varnished wood.

"Well," he whispered, "I'll be hanged!"

Gardner began fishing for a cigar. "A few more things to tell you," he said casually. "This valley is far superior to what I had expected to see. Your friend, Jim Carrick, tells me that the soil is good and the water is here if reservoirs are built to hold it. I intend to do that if the settlers are the solid citizens my salesmen say they are. Back there they've been blowed out, dried out, burned out, and starved out. They're looking for a place where there is water, good soil, and a moderate climate."

MORGAN leaned back in his chair, boots on the desk top.

"We've got them things," he said, and waited.

Gardner bit off the end of his cigar and dug into his pockets for a match.

"Folks like a show," he commented. "We're selling land and after that I'll sell them water. I've got a surveying crew in the hills now. We've got to live with them, so we want to start off right. The thing we've got to do is avoid letting them get any idea that the drawing is crooked. Knowing Ed Cole, I'm sure he'll work on that end."

Gardner found a match, struck it, and fired his cigar. Still Morgan held his silence, knowing from Gardner's roundabout approach that there was more to come.

"I've been pounding my brain until I got the right idea." Gardner blew out a long smoke plume. "Pretty girls always appeal to a crowd of men, so I want you to line up two pretty girls to help with the drawing."

This was what Gardner had been working up to. Morgan took his feet off the desk and stood up. Jewell Clancy and Peg Royce were the only pretty girls in the valley as far as he knew, and he couldn't ask either one of them.

"I won't do it," Morgan said angrily. "Peg's dad is Pete Royce, and Jewell's is Broad Clancy. You know how both of them stand."

Gardner waved his cigar at Morgan. "That's the reason we want them. The settlers can't accuse us of being crooked with those girls doing the drawing."

"I won't do it!" Morgan said again, hotly. "Yuh're crazy to think I would."

Gardner's chubby face reddened. "I was crazy to contract with the Sneed boys to butcher wild hogs so we'd have pork for our customers. I was crazy to ride out to Broad Clancy's camp and ask him for beef. I suppose I was crazy to come up here at all!"

"What you talkin' about?"

"We contracted to furnish water, fresh meat, and horse feed during the drawing and for a week before to those who got here early. I heard through this man Royce that there were wild hogs in the tules. He said he butchered them all the time, so I got the Sneed boys to butcher enough to keep us in fresh meat until we get Clancy's beef

to the settlers."

"You asked Broad Clancy to furnish us with fresh meat?" Morgan demanded.

"Why not?"

"Nothin', except it don't make sense for him to do it. I can't understand why he didn't pull a gun on yuh when yuh went up there."

"He was very courteous," Gardner said stiffly. "Abel Purdy went with me. He introduced us and the instant I told Clancy what I wanted he said he'd sell us all we needed. I told him we'd pay top price and save him a drive to the railhead."

"It don't make sense," Morgan said stubbornly. "You don't know Clancy. He was ornery before Rip was killed. He'll be twice as bad now."

"You've got him wrong," Gardner muttered. "He sees the handwriting on the wall, and he's smart enough to read it."

Morgan let it go at that, but he knew Clancy was not a man to look for handwriting on the wall. He would use his beef as a lethal weapon to wreck the land sale, and there was no way to counter his move unless Morgan could find out what his plan was.

Gardner fidgeted at the door, puffing fiercely on his cigar and eyeing Morgan.

"I didn't think you'd get your neck bowed over asking those girls to help," he finally said. "We've got to figure every corner, and it's my guess trouble will pop in a few days. I've already told the girls you'd ask them."

So he was committed. He said, "All right," and sat down at his desk again, feet cocked in front of him.

He didn't notice when Gardner left. Resentment died in him. Gardner was a good man, with savvy for his part of the business, the kind of savvy that Morgan didn't have, but Gardner lacked the understanding Morgan had about men like Broad Clancy. Trouble would pop all right, and probably over Turkey Track beef.

Morgan was still at his desk when the rumble of a heavily loaded wagon brought him to the street door. Jim Carrick was bringing in another load of hay. Buck was lying on his back behind him with his hat pulled over his face.

Morgan hesitated, knowing this was something that had to be done. He should have ridden out to Carrick's place. Now that Jim was in town, he had to see him. He went back for his hat and when he reached the street Carrick had turned at the intersection and pulled in behind the Silver Spur Saloon.

THE wagon was stopped beside a half-formed stack when Morgan reached it. "Howdy, Jim!" he called.

Carrick stepped away from the load, saw who it was, and let out a great squall.

"Well, cuss me if it ain't Murdo! Where yuh been, boy?"

Morgan gripped the farmer's hard hand. His fear had been groundless. Jim Carrick held no bitterness toward him.

"Gettin' over a bullet hole Flint gave me," he said.

"Doc said you'd been shot, but I couldn't keep from thinkin' yuh'd be back, so went ahead on this hay deal. Gardner's took over and that's what he said to do."

"That's right." Morgan swung a hand toward the finished stacks. "That's a lot of hay. I don't have any idea if we'll use all of it."

"Better have it on hand. Tried to buy some of Royce's old hay, but he wouldn't let it go."

"We'll have enough. Some of 'em will come by stage or hossback. Soon as the drawin's over the majority of 'em will scatter and figger on comin' back in the spring."

"Buck's up on the load," Carrick said, as if suddenly remembering. "Buck, Murdo's here."

Young Carrick shoved his face into view, dislike stamped upon it.

"Yeah, I heard him. Kept hopin' yuh'd cashed in, Morgan."

Jim's eyes hardened. "Yuh're too old and too big to have to lick, but I'll do

it if I hear any more of that out of yuh."

Buck grunted an oath and drew back.

"Let it go," Morgan murmured. "He's still in love."

"Don't make no difference," Carrick said bitterly. "He's been seein' that Royce girl. She came over a time or two after you left. Soon as he could stay in a saddle he rode over there, but she won't marry him."

"About Tom." Morgan dug a boot toe into the dirt. "I was there when he was killed. Mebbe there was some way I could have —"

"None of that talk," Carrick said sharply. "Doc told me how it was. I talked to the Clancy girl, too. Tom just had to keep lookin' for trouble till he found it. Headed for town soon as he got back the day you left. Allowed there'd be fightin' and he was goin' to side you."

"If I'd known that I'd have talked to him," Morgan said. "Mebbe he'd have stayed in town."

"No sense blamin' yoreself. You plugged Flint and got yoreself shot up to boot. What's done is done. I ain't seen old Broad since it happened, but they tell me he's about loco. Keep yore eyes on him, son." Carrick paused, his gaze on somebody behind Morgan. He muttered, "There she is."

"Murdo, I heard you were back!"

It was Peg Royce, panting from her run, her dark eyes afire with pleasure. Morgan started to say something, but didn't, for Peg threw her arms around his neck and pulled his lips down to hers.

There was no reserve about her, no holding back, no subterfuge. She had never made any secret of her want of him, and now she told the world. Even then, with the sweet taste of her lips upon his, with the heat of her kiss burning through him, the thought of Jewell Clancy was a quick repelling force in his mind.

"All right!" Buck Carrick slid off the load to the ground.

Peg stepped away from Morgan, composed and unabashed.

"Hello, Buck. I told you the bullet hadn't been molded that could kill him."

"I wish it'd been me instead of Flint that had that chance." Buck took another step toward Morgan, his great shoulders hunched, his fists balled in front of him, his handsome face turned ugly by the fury of his rage. "I'm goin' to bust you, Morgan! If I had a gun I'd kill yuh!"

Indecision gripped Morgan. He stepped back, thinking of Tom Carrick, of Jim, and how much he owed him, and knew he couldn't fight Buck.

"Don't try it," he said. "I've got nothin' to fight yuh for."

Buck's laugh was a taunting slap. "I shore have got somethin' to fight you for."

"Which same don't make a girl love you," Morgan said.

He went back another step, heard Peg cry, "Don't Buck! If you love me, don't!"

But Buck didn't stop. Weeks of smoldering hate exploded in him now, taking him beyond the edge of reason.

"Yuh was sweet on her all the time!" Buck bawled. "I ain't been fooled a little bit. She'd of married me this summer if it hadn't been for you. Now I'm goin' to fix that mug of yores so she won't do no more kissin' on it!"

XVII

ONE of Buck's great fists swung out. He had strength. Nothing more, and Morgan knew he could cut him down with half a dozen driving blows. Still he couldn't do it. He ducked the fist and retreated, still searching for something that would stop the boy. Peg was at Buck's side, beating at him with her fists.

"He doesn't want to fight you, you fool!" she was crying. "I'd never marry you! I never would have!"

But it was Jim Carrick, who letting it play out this far, drove sense into his boy. Gripping his pitchfork, the tines shining in the sunlight, he brought it forward in a quick jab, slashing Buck in the rump.

Buck let out a howl of pain and, throwing his shoulders back in an in-

voluntary motion, grabbed his seat.

"Get back on that load," Jim said hoarsely. "If I have to do that again, yuh'll be eatin' off a high shelf for the rest of the summer."

Buck sidled back toward the wagon, the fight gone out of him. But the bitterness was still there, a hatred that would fester with time until he became a madman capable of killing. Without a word, he climbed back on the load.

Peg gripped Morgan's arm. "I want to talk to you," she whispered.

Nodding at Jim Carrick, Morgan turned away, deeply troubled. He respected and liked Carrick as he had respected and liked few men. He would be largely indebted to him for whatever success he had with the land sale, but life was dealing off the bottom of the deck. First he had been indirectly to blame for Tom's death. Now Buck was working himself into a killing frenzy.

"I've been looking for you," Peg said hurriedly. "Every time I came to town I asked Gardner. Why didn't you let me know?"

"I didn't think yuh'd worry. Doc thought it was better if nobody knew."

"You knew I'd worry," she said hotly. Then bitterness touched her face. "You were right. Pete Royce is my father. I couldn't be trusted."

"It wasn't that," Morgan protested. "No one knew."

They rounded the Silver Spur and went on across the street.

"Let's have supper in the hotel, Murdo," Peg said as if she had only then thought of it. "Royce hasn't been home for a long time and I'm tired of eating alone."

"All right," Morgan grunted, not wanting to because he hadn't seen Jewell, and he didn't want to meet her with Peg on his arm. But if Peg felt his lack of enthusiasm, she gave no indication of it.

"Royce and Blazer are h a n g i n g around to kill you," she said, "if you turned up alive. Cole will be here for the drawing. I wanted to tell you about him the last time, but I couldn't. You thought he was your friend."

"I know. He saw Broad Clancy. Jewell told me what he was trying to do."

"Jewell told you!" She bit her lip, not letting her sudden flare of anger show. "What are you going to do when he comes back?"

They reached the hotel and went in.

"I don't know," Morgan said.

He had known it was a situation he would have to face. Cole would come back to see if Murdo Morgan had been destroyed, and Morgan honestly didn't know what would happen then. He shrank, even in his thoughts, from killing this man he had called friend.

"It's good to see you on your feet, Murdo."

It was Jewell, coming down the stairs beyond the desk. She was wearing a blue bombazine dress with long sleeves. Morgan had not seen her in that dress before, and his eyes, taking in her small figure, showed his appreciation. He lifted his hat.

"It's good to be on my feet," he told her.

Jewell nodded to Peg. "How are you, Peg?"

For an instant Peg had no answer. She stood tall and straight beside Morgan, her hand still possessively on his arm, her head high, as she fought for self control. Morgan, turning his gaze to her, saw the pulse beat in her throat, the quiver of her lips. She had, he guessed, sought this meeting, and now that it was here, she couldn't bring it off the way she had planned.

"I'm fine, Jewell," Peg murmured. "We're having supper. Won't you come with us?"

"Thank you, but I've had supper."

"Gardner said he'd told you girls I'd ask yuh to help with the drawin'," Morgan said bluntly. "That ain't just right, knowin' how yore folks feel."

"I'll be glad to," Peg said quickly.

JEWELL hesitated, and she was the one about whom Morgan was most concerned. Pete Royce was no good. Everybody in the valley knew that. Peg hated him, and she would help with the drawing to spite him if for no other reason. Broad Clancy was something else. Morgan knew Jewell didn't agree

with him, but she didn't hate him.

"Broad won't like it," he said.

"She'll do it, Murdo," Peg breathed. "It's the least she can do. Gardner said it would be a big help to you, because everybody would know it was an honest draw."

A smile touched Jewell's lips. "Of course I'll help, Murdo."

Peg's answering smile was quick and lip-deep. "I thought you would."

Morgan looking from one to the other, did not fully understand. He only knew they were women, facing each other, fighting with claw instead of fist, one tall and dark and full-bodied, the other small and slim, with wheat-gold hair afire now, with a slanted ray of sunlight falling across her head. There was this moment of tension, spark-filled. It was steel pressed against a whirling emery wheel, and Morgan, striving desperately to find something to say to break the tension, could do no better than say:

"Doc says it healed up fine."

Jewell brought her eyes to Morgan. "I've worried about you. You were so weak when I left you."

Morgan felt Peg stiffen.

"You were with him when he was shot?" she asked coldly.

"No, but I found him afterwards. I guessed Flint would head for the lava flow and Doc and I were close enough to them to hear the shots. I stayed with Murdo until a f t e r his fever broke."

"And you left him when he was still weak?"

"Doc thought I should. Dad was looking for him, and we thought that if I came back and said I couldn't find him, Dad would pull in his men, thinking that if I couldn't find him, he was really gone. It did work that way."

Peg's breath was a long sigh. "If I had been taking care of him," she whispered, "I'd have stayed until he was well."

"He should have sent for you," Jewell murmured.

"I was all right," Morgan cut in.

A sob came out of Peg, startlingly sudden. "You wouldn't send for me, would you, Murdo? You couldn't trust me like you could her."

Whirling, she ran out of the lobby and on through the dust of the street to her horse. Mounting, she quit town at a wild, reckless pace.

"I'm sorry," Jewell said contritely. "I shouldn't have done that. I don't know why I did."

Still Morgan did not fully understand it. He only knew that women clash in a different way than men, that Jewell had struck back in self-defense. He turned toward the dining room, then swung back to say:

"I don't want to bust you and yore father up."

"You won't. I've already left home. Now go get your supper. . . ."

Gardner had figured the uncertain element of time as accurately as a man could. His office crew came north on the stage from Alturas, fast wagons bringing their equipment. Empty water wagons creaked across the desert to make the long haul from the creeks around Clancy Mountain, where the water ran clear and cold in a swift lacy pattern. Lumbering freighters, starting earlier, brought food supplies, blankets, a heavy stove for the restaurant, tents, and lumber from Lakeview for the platform in the big tent, and tables and benches for the dining room.

Morgan, watching idly because there was nothing for him to do at the moment, marveled at the military precision with which Gardner's men worked. Saws bit through pine. The ring of hammer on nail was a constant racketing noise. Canvas was stretched, stakes pounded deep into the earth, ropes tightened. Within a matter of hours, Irish Bend had reached out across the flat to triple in size.

Gardner, flushing with pride, slapped Morgan on the back.

"We're ready. Let 'em come!" He grinned in sudden embarrassment. "You know, Morgan, I've kicked myself for not taking a partnership in this deal. I misjudged the land and I misjudged you. I thought the valley was too far from a railroad, and I didn't believe you could take care of yourself against the opposition you'd have."

"We're a long ways from a railroad," Morgan admitted, "and there's still plenty of opposition."

"Steel will come," Gardner said confidently. "And as for the opposition, Cole hasn't showed his face, Blazer and Royce have stayed out of town since you called their bluff, and it looks like Clancy is convinced we mean business."

GARDNER might be right about the railroad, but he was dead wrong about the opposition. Morgan's mind turned to Clancy's beef agreement as it had continually during his waking hours since he had heard about it. The deal had been made. There was nothing to do but let time bring Clancy into the open.

"I couldn't have put this over if you hadn't given me a hand," Morgan said. "I didn't have no idea there would be this whoopdeedoo when I bought the grant."

Gardner showed his pleasure. "Glad to do it, Morgan. Fact is, I'll be a partner when I get the ditch system in. Funny about me. Some men get pleasure out of whisky or women. Bringing farmers onto good land where they can own their home is mine." He chuckled. "Only this time somebody else is taking the risk. If the sale doesn't go off, you'll lose your shirt. If it does you'll be a rich man."

"If it don't go off," Morgan said grimly, "you'll be diggin' into yore pocket, because my shirt won't pay for all this."

Gardner took a fresh grip on his cigar. "Guess we'd better see it goes over." He squinted up at the bright sky. "If the good weather holds like it has, we won't need to worry. Let them come. We've taken care of everything but the weather, which is one thing you just have to leave to Providence."

They did come. By stage. By horseback. By buggies. By buckboards. And in covered wagons loaded with household goods, ready to stay through the winter, echoes of their passage singing across the sage and bunchgrass flat to die among the empty miles. All roads led to Irish Bend. There the trail ended, the human tide piled up, and chaos had to be hammered into order.

It was the same drama that had been enacted and reenacted through the centuries, the drama that had made America. Explorers driven on by the deathless urge to see beyond the skyline, to see where the rivers were born.

Missionaries, men of God, their Bibles under their arms, risking their scalps to tell the howling, blood-lusting brownskins of another world and their soul's salvation. Mountain men, buckskin-clad, fringe a-sway, Indian wives and half-breed children, taking the savages' way of life, driven into the empty land of the great silence because a neighbor had built within sight of them, the smoke from his chimney corrupting the horizon.

Miners and prospectors, haunting the bars and gulches, urged on by an inner hunger for the yellow metal, building boom town after boom town, climbing above timber line where ten times out of nine, they said, you'd find silver. Cattlemen, land pirates, harking back to the feudal days of chivalry with the chivalry so often missing, hiring the knights of horse and rope and gun, an aristocracy taking what it wanted without a by-your-leave of anyone, holding to what they claimed by any means they had, surrendering only to death or the tidal wave of those whose best weapon was the plow.

XVIII

EVERY wave also brought the others. Hangers-on. Tradesmen. Lawyers and doctors, preachers and teachers, blacksmiths and carpenters. Women, the virtuous and the tinseled, those who followed their men because theirs was a love and devotion that went beyond human analysis, those who merely followed men, accepting their sordid profession through choice or perhaps driven to it by the exigencies of life.

Bad men and good, outlaws and law-abiding, the strong who shaped life and the weak who were shaped by that life. Bunco artists. Grifters. Con men.

All of them were here in Irish Bend, and Abel Purdy grew with the needs

of the day.

Three men tried to hold up the Stockmen's Bank. Purdy caught them from one side, Morgan from the other, and the three of them died in the deep dust of Irish Bend's street while gunfire racketed between the paintless false fronts.

A shell game operator set up his board in front of the Silver Spur. Purdy invited him to leave. The invitation was accepted. A drunk accosted Jewell Clancy on the street. Morgan rammed his way through the crowd and knocked the man down. He spat out a tooth, wiped blood from his mouth, and bawled,

"Yuh own the town, mebbe, but yuh don't own the women!"

Morgan hauled him to his feet, knocked another tooth lose and told him to leave town. Invitation again accepted.

It was rough and tough and turbulent, but Abel Purdy and Murdo Morgan held down the lid, and some of the turbulence died. Good men, these farmers. Driven by land hunger and a dream. Freckle-faced kids. Sunbonneted women. Weather-darkened men with hands curled to fit the handles of their plows. Kansans and Nebraskans, and east to the Appalachians.

"Good men," Gardner said. "That's why I'm aiming to build your irrigation system."

Good men, Morgan knew. Men with enough money to buy their land and still have some left for the hard years ahead. The raggle-taggle, the visionary, the seekers of something for nothing would come later, to settle on free Government land. Maybe they would prove up. Maybe not. But these men were different. They would give the land a fair trial. If it beat them, they would lose the stake they had spent half a lifetime making. If they lost, they would move on and start again.

Jewell's hotel and Gardner's tent with its hay beds were filled. The store sold out and left the owner cursing because he had lacked faith and failed to build up his stock. The hotel dining room never had an empty table and the tent restaurant did as well.

At night campfires were stars stretching across the flat south of town. The haystacks the Carricks had built melted like snowdrifts before a burning sun. Kansas men gathered together. Nebraska men. Iowa. Missouri. Illinois. Visited and dreamed and stared at Clancy Mountain and allowed there might be deer up there.

In every group leaders lifted their heads above the others, were listened to and toadied to, and grew deep-chested with attention. Clay Dalton, from the Nebraska sand hills, shook Morgan's hand with respect. He turned his head and spat a brown ribbon that plopped into the wheel-and-hoof-churned dust of the street.

"Never seen a purtier valley, Mr. Morgan. Had some misgivin's, comin' so far on the big gab of men yuh sent out to sell yore land. Figgered it might be just another rush, aimin' to take the bark off our backs, but I reckon if yuh give us a fair sale next week, we'll be mighty well satisfied."

Good men. Excited a little by the crowd and a new land. Everything new. Talked to the old settlers like Jim Carrick. Asking him this and that. What were the winters like? Were the summers always this cool? What could you raise? Would fruit grow here? Satisfied, solid men riding out over the valley, scratching toes through the dirt, picking up a handful and letting it dribble between their fingers, finding the spots they hoped to draw.

Overnight sleepy old Irish Bend, the cowtown, was gone. A new Irish Bend throbbing with boom town life, more canvas than wood, mushroomed among the clumps of sage and rabbit brush. The old inhabitants scratched their heads and rubbed their eyes, and could not believe this thing they saw.

SOME cursed Murdo Morgan. Some looked at him with new interest and admitted that maybe Broad Clancy was finished. He hadn't showed up. He hadn't turned a hair. By this time he knew that Murdo Morgan was alive and in Irish Bend. It wasn't like Broad

Clancy, and nobody understood. Not even Jewell. Not even Murdo Morgan.

Then Ed Cole rode the stage in from Prineville.

Morgan was in his office visiting with Clay Dalton and some of his Nebraska friends when his door opened.

"Ed Cole's here," Gardner said.

Morgan rose, a pressure on his chest making it hard for him to breathe.

"I'll go see what he wants," he said. "Don't reckon I'll be long."

He stepped into the main office, the clattering typewriters annoying him. He strode into Gardner's office, gritting his teeth against the clamor that drove a shivering spasm down his spine. Ed Cole was standing at the corner of Gardner's desk, an easy smile on his lips, his blue eyes as guileless as they had been the day he had sat in his San Francisco office and told Morgan he would see about the loan.

"How are you, friend Murdo?" Cole said, in a soft courteous voice. He held out his hand. "I came to watch the drawing. Looks like it'll be quite a show."

Gardner stepped in behind Morgan, closing the door after him. Morgan ignored Cole's hand. His breathing sawed into the quiet, air coming from the bottom of his lungs as he fought his anger.

"That ain't the reason yuh're here," he said.

Cole dropped his hand, the mask of courtesy stripped from his face.

"This is a fine way to greet a friend!" he said harshly.

"Friend?" Morgan turned to Gardner. "Wonder what he'd say an enemy was?"

Cole slipped his hands into his coat pockets. There might be a gun there. Morgan wasn't sure.

"Let's have it, Morgan," Cole said. "We've known each other a long time. You wouldn't be where you are now if I hadn't negotiated your loan for you."

"I ain't shore of that, but what yuh said about knowin' each other is right. I'm rememberin' the time a bunch of miners had you cornered in Ouray. They claimed yuh'd crooked 'em in a poker game. I didn't believe it then, but I do now. Yuh was mighty glad I was around."

Cole licked dry lips. "Sure, Murdo. You saved my life. I returned the favor by helping you get a loan. Now why—"

"No use of lyin' about it, Ed. Yuh got me that loan because yuh thought I was a cinch to lose out in this land sale and yore bank would get the wagon road grant for the price of the loan yuh'd made me. A blasted steal, which makes yuh a robber same as if yuh'd held a gun on me."

Color bloomed in Cole's cheeks. He chewed a lip, eyes not so guileless now as they whipped to Gardner and back to the raging Morgan. Suddenly he was afraid. Morgan remembered the way he had looked that night in Ouray. He saw the man now as he was, handsome and smooth-mannered, but with neither love nor respect for anything or anybody but himself. He was like a tree covered by sound bark, but utterly rotten inside.

"Who's been lying to you?" Cole asked in a vain attempt to bluff it through.

"Nobody. Jewell Clancy told me about you bein' out there to see Broad. Yuh made a deal with him. If somethin' went wrong so yore back-shootin' gundogs didn't get me, Broad was supposed to do the job and yuh was goin' to deed him the land he needed when yore bank got the road grant. Yuh never intended to keep that bargain, did yuh, Ed?"

"You've been lied to!" Cole screamed.

"Then why did yuh come to the valley after I got here?" Morgan demanded. "If yuh were on the level, why didn't yuh see me? You're doin' the lyin', Ed. You put Blazer and Royce on my tail. Then you tried to make it a shore thing by seein' Clancy. Peg Royce said—"

"Peg wouldn't say anything. She took my money—"

Cole caught himself. It was admission enough. Dull red crept over Cole's face and on around to the back of his neck. There was this moment of struggle within him before he made a futile effort to keep his self respect.

"I'm not going to stand here and be

called a liar!" he raged and started for the door.

Morgan grabbed a handful of his shirt and jerked him to a stop.

"Comin' here was yore idea," Morgan said. "Now yuh can answer a question. Why did Broad agree to sell us beef?"

"I don't know." Cole tried to pull free. "I haven't seen Broad."

Morgan shook him. "Yuh paid Royce and Blazer to kill me, didn't yuh?"

COLE struck at Morgan, fist stinging his cheek. Morgan hit him, a wicked right that slammed Cole against the wall. He wiped a sleeve across a bloody nose, then his hand dropped to his pocket and he pulled a gun. Morgan jumped at him, gripping Cole's right wrist with his left hand, twisting until Cole dropped the gun. He kept on twisting, bringing Cole's body around until he cried out in agony. He kicked at Morgan, tried to hit him with his left.

"If I didn't make myself clear, I will now," Morgan said.

He hit Cole again, driving him back against the wall. Cursing, Cole lowered his head and drove at him. Made wild by fear and pain, Cole forgot anything he had ever known about fighting. He tried to stamp on Morgan's toes. Drove a thumb at Morgan's eye. Lifted a knee to get him in the middle. Nothing worked. Morgan was nowhere and everywhere, letting Cole's charge wear itself out.

When the wild fury in Cole had blunted itself on the hard rock of failure, Morgan sledged him on the point of the chin. Cole dropped his hands and shook his head. Then his knees gave and he fell. The door to Gardner's office had been opened. Clay Dalton and his Nebraska friends stood knotted there.

"Boot him, Morgan!" Dalton called. "Bust his ribs in."

Cole groaned and drove a foot at Morgan's shin. Pain laced up Morgan's leg. He caught Cole's foot and dragged him out of Gardner's office, the crowd breaking to let him through. He went on, with Cole cursing and twisting and trying to jerk free. His head rapped on a desk, and he cried out in pain again. Morgan took him on through the gate in the railing and out through the front door. He let the foot go then and, pulling Cole to his feet, swung him to the edge of the walk and cracked him on the jaw.

Cole sprawled into the dust of the street. He sat up, sleeving dirt and sweat from his bruised face.

"All right, Morgan," he said thickly. "I'm licked, but you never made a bigger mistake in your life."

"Get out of town," Morgan said.

Cole came to his feet, lurching like a drunk, and reached a horse racked in front of the Elite. He tried to get into saddle and failed. He stood there a moment, trembling, hanging to the horn, knees weak, oblivious to the curious crowd that watched him.

He tried again, and this time succeeded in getting a leg across the leather. Reining around the saloon, he took the north road out of town, slumped forward, reeling uncertainly with each jolting step of the horse.

"Who was he?" Dalton asked.

"A gent who thought he was tough," Morgan answered.

Dalton laughed. "Never seen a man take a worse beatin'. I'd shore hate to be on the other side from you."

"We're on the same side, Clay."

Morgan wiped a hand across his face, a sickness crawling through him. There had been no satisfaction in beating Ed Cole. He pushed through the crowd and tramped back to his office. Gardner came in, eyes worried.

"That wasn't good," Gardner said. "Cole won't forget it. You'd better stay in town."

"I'm soft," Morgan muttered. "I should have killed him."

Gardner nodded sober agreement. "Before this is over, you will, or he'll kill you. . . ."

OVERNIGHT the temperament of the camp changed. The day Morgan had his fight with Cole the settlers were optimistic and good-humored. The next morning they stood in thick knots along the street, scowling, a sullen

anger upon them.

Gardner, taught by long experience to react instantly to a crowd's mood, felt the change and started looking for Morgan. He found him having breakfast in the hotel dining room.

"Trouble's loose," Gardner said worriedly. "The settlers are standing around with their lower lips hanging down so far they'll trip on them."

"First time I've seen you worried," Morgan said, reaching for tobacco and paper.

"First time I have been. You don't reckon they'd listen to Cole?"

"He's not their kind, but they would listen to Royce and Blazer. We'd better get the drawin' started."

"We can't. We advertised the first of September, and that's what it's got to be."

"What's bitin' 'em?"

"I don't know. Looks like they'd come in if they had a kick."

Morgan sealed his cigarette and slid it into his mouth. "Let's go talk to 'em."

"We can't risk a fight. That bunch could turn into a mob in a minute. We've got to find somebody we know to tell us what's wrong."

"Let's get hold of Dalton."

They left the hotel, the crowd on the boardwalk making a path for them. Morgan spoke to some he knew. They nodded, saying nothing, faces sullen and resentful, the pressure of their hostility pushing at Morgan.

"Yuh're shore right about these boys," Morgan muttered. "Wouldn't take much to turn 'em into a pack of wolves."

XIX

GARDNER and Morgan found Dalton at the bar with his Nebraska friends. Dalton's face was showing his resentment.

"You played hob, Morgan," he said darkly. "Didn't think yuh was that short-sighted."

"All right, Clay," Morgan said mildly. "Let's have it."

"I had it for supper," Dalton growled. "I don't want no more of it."

"Blast it!" Gardner cried in a frenzy. "What are you talking about?"

Dalton snorted and reached for a bottle. "Don't give me that pap. I figgered yuh was a straight-shootin' outfit. Now I'm givin' yuh some advice. You run a straight draw or yuh'll get a neck stretchin'."

Gardner looked at Morgan helplessly. Morgan's cigarette had gone cold in his mouth. His searching mind could find no clue in what Dalton had said.

"It'll be an honest draw, Clay," he said patiently, "but there's somethin' we don't understand. What was it yuh had for supper?"

Dalton gave him a look rich with scorn. "Them hogs, yuh fool! We took one of them critters and cooked some of it. We couldn't eat it. Nobody else could, neither. The meals in the tent restaurant wasn't no better."

Morgan looked blankly at Gardner. "What hogs?"

"I told you about them," Gardner said defensively. "I contracted with the Sneed boys to butcher some wild hogs. I saw one of the loads they brought in yesterday. The meat looked all right."

"Shore, looked all right," Dalton snorted. "Yuh try eatin' any?"

"No, but I tell you the meat looked all right."

"I said did yuh eat a hunk of it?" Dalton bellowed. "Tasted like yuh'd fed them hogs onions."

"Royce said they ate wild hogs all the time around here."

"So Royce gave yuh the idea," Morgan said thoughtfully. "I don't know much about the Sneed boys, but they're north rimmers too."

"I know what Royce is," Gardner began, "but it seemed like a good—"

Morgan waved him to silence. "Clay, I don't know just what's wrong, but I'll find out. There's several hombres around here who don't want the land sale to come off. This hog business is part of the deal."

Doubt struggled through Dalton. "I'd like to believe yuh, Morgan, but these fellers who came around last night

talked mighty straight. They said we was suckers to come out here. Claimed yuh'd crook us on the draw. Good land would go to the Clancys. It was part of a deal yuh'd made with 'em last spring. They said yuh was pushin' them hogs off on us 'cause it was the cheapest meat yuh could get."

It made sense now. Fresh meat that nobody could eat after enjoying the anticipation of it. Then some of the valley settlers showing up and fanning a smoldering fire into a blaze.

"Who were those men?" Morgan asked.

"Didn't catch their names, but they lived in the valley."

"What'd they look like?"

"One was big. Kind of pig eyes. Other one was smaller. Flat nose. Blue eyes set plumb close together."

"Royce and Blazer!" Gardner cried.

"Those are two of the valley men who want us to fail," Morgan said.

"Why?" Dalton asked skeptically.

"Several reasons. One is that they'll be dispossessed as soon as somebody draws their location. You boys are playin' their game when yuh believe 'em. Now I'm goin' to lay my cards on the table. I need yore help. We've bought some Clancy beef, but they haven't got the herd down from the hills yet. I'll go see Clancy today, but we haven't got anybody to do the butcherin'."

"We'll do it for yuh," Dalton said.

"Then that's fine. Pass the word along what I'm doin'. And, Gardner, ride out to the lake and see what's wrong with that pork."

Grumbling, Gardner followed Morgan outside. "Clancy will kill you if you go up there."

"I'll take Purdy. Get now! Split the breeze."

Still grumbling, Gardner turned toward the livery stable. Morgan angled across the street to Purdy's office, feeling hostile eyes upon him. There was no overt act. Just sullen silence like the moments of sticky stillness before the heavens empty upon an earth made dry by a torrid sun. Morgan had seen mobs form; he knew the signs, and he didn't like what he saw this morning.

PURDY was pacing the floor of his office, fingers working restlessly through his short hair. He waved a hand toward the street, and said, without greeting:

"What's the matter with those madmen?"

When Morgan told him about the pork, he smiled thinly.

"Nobody can eat a hog that's been feedin' on tule bulbs. It's like Dalton said. They taste like they'd been eatin' onions."

"But Gardner said the meat looked good, and the Sneeds claimed they butchered wild hogs every year."

"Shore, the meat does look good, but the nesters always drive a batch of hogs home and fatten 'em on grain before they butcher. Besides, I'd say the Sneeds were on Cole's side."

It was done. Nothing that Morgan or Gardner could do would change the settlers' temper except to get Turkey Track beef in today and start Dalton and his friends butchering. It was touch and go, a question whether even good meat could satisfy the contract holders.

Morgan looked around Purdy's office. It seemed no different than it had the first day Morgan was here, but it *was* different, and the difference lay in Abel Purdy himself. Doc Velie had been wrong about the man, and Morgan had been right. A miracle had been performed. Morgan's confidence had restored the heart to this shell of what had once been a courageous man.

"Gardner contracted with Broad Clancy for some beef," Morgan said. "I'm ridin' out there today."

This was Abel Purdy's test. Rodding a brawling boom town was one thing; facing Broad Clancy was something else, for Clancy had owned Purdy the same as he had owned the storekeeper and the barber and the stableman and the rest in the town. Like Purdy, they could have said they wanted security, and that security lasted only as long as Broad Clancy did.

But the metamorphosis was complete. Purdy glanced at his star and slowly

brought his eyes to Morgan.

"I'll go along for the ride, Murdo. If yuh have any relatives who want to hear from yuh, yuh'd better take time to write to 'em."

"I don't," Morgan said. "Let's ride."

They left town fifteen minutes later, skirting the white city of tents and covered wagons, ignoring the sullen stares that followed them out of town. Black clouds were rearing threatening heads along the southwestern sky and a cool damp wind was breaking through the gap between the Sunsets and Clancy Mountain.

"We're in for a change of weather," Purdy said.

"A storm would play the devil with those hombres," Morgan grumbled. "With their tempers screwed up like they are now."

Purdy turned his pale eyes on Morgan. "The world is a more mixed-up business than most of us realize if we live just for ourselves. Remember me sayin' that time is a great sea washin' around us?" When Morgan nodded, he went on, "I said we'd see how well Broad had built his walls. Now we know. Not high enough. I saw that before the invasion hit the valley. I knew it the minute yuh walked into my office after Flint had shot yuh. We'd been thinkin' you were dead. When I saw you, I knew yuh'd take a heap of killin'."

"My hide ain't that tough," Morgan said.

"You may die this mornin', of course. What I meant is that men like you believe in somethin' strong enough to fight for it regardless of the interests that bring changes about and batter down the walls that the Broad Clancys build. This is the same fight that has gone on since the beginnin' of time, just a skirmish, but the same fight and we'll always have it."

"Doc Velie said you thought too much," observed Morgan.

Purdy smiled meagerly. "Mebbe. Funny thing. I've wanted to be the kind of man Doc Velie was. He was the only one in the valley before you came who wasn't afraid of Clancy. When I heard what you and Doc and Jewell had done, I knew Broad was licked and I was goin' to help. Security for me wasn't important. The right to get up and howl when I wanted to was."

"Yuh shoot mighty straight for a gent who wears glasses."

Purdy flushed with the praise. "I see all right." He squinted at the spreading gloom of the clouds. "Let's set a faster pace, Murdo."

THEY held their direction south across the slowly lifting sage flat. Then they were among the buttes, where the junipers were bigger and more thickly spaced than in the valley. Morgan, staring thoughtfully at the sharp point of Clancy Mountain, wondered if old Broad intended to keep his word. If he didn't, and the cattle were still in the marsh behind Clancy Mountain, there would be no fresh meat for the settlers today or any day.

They circled a butte and, breaking over a ridge, looked down upon a large Turkey Track herd. The cattle were being held in a pocket carpeted by bunchgrass, with a creek cutting through the center. Rimrock around three sides made a natural corral so that only a few riders were necessary to hold them. All but two of the punchers were idling around a fire directly below Morgan.

"We won't need that many," Morgan said musingly. "Wonder why he fetched that big a herd?"

"That isn't the question," Purdy said. "I'm wonderin' why he brought any."

"He's down there." Morgan pointed to a rider angling toward the fire from the grazing cattle. "We'll ask him."

They dropped down the slope toward the fire, causing a stirring among the buckaroos when they were seen. One called to Broad Clancy who looked up, saw Morgan and Purdy, and brought his horse to a gallop. By the time Morgan gained the flat, Clancy had reached the others and dismounted. As Morgan rode up to the fire, he had a feeling that this was what Clancy had expected and planned.

"Howdy," Morgan said civilly, as he reined up.

Clancy did not return the greeting. He stood between the fire and Morgan, his spindly legs spread wide. Short John and the rest of the crew were behind him and on the opposite side of the fire. Clancy did not ask Morgan and Purdy to step down. He stood in cold silence, a sober, bitter man, with his eyes smoldering emeralds under bushy brows.

There were five men behind Broad Clancy, Short John on the end. Good men for their job, salty, loyal, and ready to fight, but Morgan didn't think it would come to that. A deeper game was being played, and Morgan could guess the reason. Like Ed Cole, old Broad didn't want killing laid to his door if trouble brought an outside lawman to the valley. It meant, then, that Broad had a better idea for achieving the same end.

"Broad," Purdy said sharply, "if yuh're plannin' on burnin' powder, yuh'd better get both of us because I'll take yuh in if yuh kill Morgan."

Clancy didn't laugh as he would have two months before. He had forgotten how to laugh, and Morgan, staring at him, realized only then how much Broad Clancy had changed. Rip's death had done it, but Morgan could not judge the depth of the change.

"Why haven't yuh fetched the cows Gardner bought?" Morgan asked.

Still Clancy said nothing. His green eyes stabbed Morgan, probing for something he didn't know. He seemed older and frailer than when Morgan had seen him in the Siilver Spur that first day he was in the valley, so frail that it looked as if his bow legs would crumple under the weight of the heavy gun on his hip.

"Did you kill Rip, Morgan?" Clancy asked suddenly.

"No." Morgan understood it now. Clancy hadn't been sure. Perhaps that was the reason he had called off the hunt when Morgan was wounded. "Tom Carrick did."

"That was what Jewell said," Clancy muttered. "I never knew her to lie, and I don't reckon Josh Morgan's son would lie."

"We want some beef," Purdy cut in.

"Shut up, yuh doublecrossin' weasel!" Clancy was suddenly angry, terribly angry as his stare cut Purdy. He brought his gaze again to Morgan. "What'll happen if you don't get any beef?"

"I'll have trouble," Morgan said frankly. "But yuh promised Gardner."

"Yeah," Clancy breathed, "and I keep my word. I'll have 'em within a mile of town tomorrow night."

"The boys are on the prod," said Morgan. "I've got to have some today."

"They've got to rest up," Clancy said. "Good grass here."

"Then have yore boys cut out twenty head and me and Purdy'll haze 'em to town. Yuh can bring the rest tomorrow."

CLANCY rubbed his narrow chin as if weighing a decision. The men behind him relaxed. Even Short John, who had always looked scared when ever Morgan had seen him, now appeared relieved.

"All right," Clancy said finally. "Slim. Rory. Cut out twenty head. Push 'em down the creek."

Then, for no understandable reason except that he had held it back so long, fury gripped the little cowman. It painted his face purple, brought his gnarled fist up to threaten Morgan.

"Curse the woman who gave you birth, Morgan! If I thought yuh'd killed Rip, I'd gun yuh down, but I'm lettin' yuh live because I want to see yore clodbusters put a rope around yore neck. Now get out of here!"

"We don't need that many cows," Morgan said.

"Yuh'll get 'em whether yuh need 'em or not!" Clancy screamed. "And yuh'll eat yore beef in perdition. I said to vamose! Get, 'fore I plug yuh!"

Morgan and Purdy swung their horses down the creek.

"How do yuh figger it, Murdo?" Purdy asked.

"I couldn't figger out in the first place why he promised to let us have the beef, and I can't now." Morgan twisted a smoke, frowning at it. "And I can't figger out how he's goin' to get the set-

tlers to hang us, but he was confident, Abel. Mighty confident."

XX

HARD as Clancy was, he kept his promise. The herd bedded down within a mile of Irish Bend the night after Morgan and Purdy had brought the twenty head in.

"Kill as many as they'll eat," Morgan told Clay Dalton. "I don't want 'em to think we're tryin' to save money, and yuh'll have to send some beef to the hotel and Gardner's tent restaurant."

It worked better than Morgan could have hoped. The old friendliness and optimism did not return, but the sullen suspicion was gone.

"They figger to wait and see," Dalton said. "Depends on the drawin'. Some of 'em want a lottery. Take out the fool idea of biddin' on each tract."

"Can't," Morgan told him. "There'll be on hand tomorrow. The trouble is I keep the biddin' in."

Morgan rode every day, knowing that as long as Cole and his bunch were in the valley, trouble was a constant possibility, but he could not find them.

"They've pulled out to wait until the drawin'," Morgan told Jewell the night before the land sale started, "but they'll be on hand tomorrow. The trouble is I don't know who's goin' to be on my side when the shootin' starts."

"You have more friends than anybody else in the valley, Murdo," she said.

"And more enemies. But it's the friends a man likes to think about. I wouldn't have got this far if I hadn't had some."

"Nobody ever did anything worth while alone, but you've got to keep watching, Murdo. Dad's a careful man. He has a trick that he's sure will work or he wouldn't have let it go this long." She stood looking at him, her full-lipped mouth sweetly set. "Do what you have to do. This valley is better for people than for cows."

Morgan thought about it that night and he was still thinking about it the next morning when he woke. He would do what had to be done, no matter what it did to him and Jewell Clancy.

He was shaving when he heard a tap on his door. He called, "Come in." Gardner opened the door and motioned a stocky man into the room.

"Morgan, meet Post Office Inspector Bartell. He got in on the late stage last night."

Morgan shook hands with the man. "Glad to know yuh, Bartell." He indicated a chair. "Sit down. I'll be done in a minute and we'll go down for breakfast."

Gardner paced to the window. "Mean day," he said sourly. "Sticky. We're in for a thunder shower. Weather's as jittery as a nervous woman. Tempers ruffle easy on a day like this."

The inspector smiled as he lighted a cigar. "Then they'll have to ruffle. We can't change the law."

Morgan turned from the mirror. "What law?"

"The government prohibits land allotments by lottery. That's why I'm here."

"I know that. So do you, Gardner."

Gardner shuffled uneasily. "I haven't told you, you riding and looking for Cole like you've been doing, but the contract holders elected trustees Saturday—Dalton, Jale Miller, and Hugh Frawley. Yesterday those trustees got hold of me and demanded that the drawing be made a straight lottery. No bidding. They claimed that by allowing the bidding we're opening the way for Clancy to buy in his buildings and anything he wants. They don't have much money. Clancy does, so he can outlast them. In other words, they claim they should get each tract for the contract price of two hundred dollars."

"Why, it says right on the contract that there'll be a chance to bid on each tract before it's knocked off!" Morgan exploded. "I told yuh the first time."

"I know," Gardner said gloomily, "but Frawley and Miller were pretty hostile. Been listening to Royce and Blazer again, I guess. Frawley and Miller said they couldn't guarantee that the men would stay in line if Clancy bid in a few choice tracts."

For a moment there was no sound but

the steady scratching of razor on stubble. This was the trick on which Clancy was depending, the reason for his holding back. There had been no violence, although he could have led his buckaroos into town and brought about a reign of terror. He could not be blamed for what would happen today, and there would be no trouble for him even if the Governor sent a special investigator to the valley.

THERE was no talk until Morgan finished shaving. Gardner fidgeted by the window; Bartell sat motionless, pulling steadily on his cigar. Morgan put on his shirt, buckled his gun-belt around him, and slid into his coat.

"Let's have breakfast," he said.

"What are you going to do?" Gardner asked.

"Nothin'," Morgan said flatly. "They'll abide by the contract."

After breakfast Morgan waited in the lobby for Jewell and Peg who had ridden into town the night before. They came down together, both smiling when he said, "Good morning." He could not tell from their composed faces that anything had passed between them.

"This is yore last warnin'," he said. "That platform won't be the safest place in town today."

"It'll be a good place to watch from if there's trouble," Peg said.

Morgan looked helplessly at Jewell who smiled as if this were an ordinary day instead of the most special one that Paradise Valley had ever known.

"I wouldn't miss it," she said.

"All right," he said. "We'd better get over there."

They followed the boardwalk to the Stockmen's Bank, angled across the intersection to the store and moved around it to the big tent. Purdy was waiting outside. He motioned to Morgan and stepped back.

"Broad Clancy ain't here but Short John is," Purdy said when Morgan joined him. "He's got six cowhands with him. What do yuh think he's up to?"

"I'm guessin' he'll make a bid on a tract of land," Morgan said. "Then all tarnation will blow up in our faces. I didn't figger it out until this mornin'. Gardner just told me the trustees want to make it a lottery."

Purdy thought about it a moment, staring across the sage flat, troubled eyes blinking behind thick lenses.

"Cole's in there with the Sneeds, Blazer, and Royce," he said. "Pretty close to the front and on the other side of the tent. I thought of arrestin' 'em, but I don't have no real charge and I was afraid of what the settlers would do."

"That's right," Morgan agreed. "I've got a hunch I can stop 'em. I had an idea when I was shavin'. Come on up to the platform."

Purdy nodded and, turning back to Peg and Jewell, he moved beside Morgan up the middle aisle. Every bench was filled and men were packed around the sides and back of the tent. There were a thousand settlers here, Morgan guessed, perhaps more.

He spoke to some he knew, and they spoke back civilly enough. There was no evidence of the sullen anger he had felt the week before. He thought they had, as Dalton had said, decided to wait and see. There was hope in that, but the material for an explosion was still present.

Morgan stepped back when he reached the platform, motioning for Peg and Jewell to go ahead. He mentally cursed Gardner for insisting on them being here. It was not going to be the kind of show Gardner had anticipated. Morgan climbed to the platform, while Purdy remained on the ground.

"Eight o'clock," Gardner said.

Morgan nodded, his eyes sweeping the platform. The bulk of Gardner's office crew had moved over here. There was a jumble of tables and chairs, books, boxes and record sheets, and Morgan wondered if any kind of order could be kept once the drawing was under way. Gardner had seated Peg and Jewell behind a table at the front of the platform, with two boxes in front of them. The trustees were on the other side of the table, the post office inspector beyond them.

Stepping to the front of the platform, Morgan felt a sudden chill down his spine. Ed Cole's handsome face stood out in the packed mass. He was smiling, a contemptuous smile, as if this were the moment he had long enjoyed in anticipation. It was Morgan's moment, too, but now that it was here, he wished he were a million miles away.

His head was a vacuum. No words came to his tongue.

"Get it started!" Gardner whispered.

MORGAN licked dry lips, eyes turning to Jewell. It seemed to him he could hear her say again, "You've got to win, Murdo. Do what you have to do." He swung back to that ocean of faces. The chill was gone from his spine. He knew what he had to say. This had to go. It was too close to the end to miss now. It had to go!

"On behalf of the Cascade and Paradise Land Company," Morgan began, "I welcome yuh and wish yuh prosperity and happiness in yore new homes. Some of the land that will be drawn is good only for grazin' and will go out in thousand-acre tracts. The better land has been cut into smaller tracts, rangin' from one hundred and sixty acres down. The ten-acre tracts are all located south of the lake where irrigation is not necessary. Yuh'll find no better land out of doors, and I know yuh won't find another place in the West where yuh can get a clear title to a good farm for twenty dollars an acre or less.

"I have no promises to make about a railroad, but history tells us that steel will be laid to any place in the United States where the production is big enough to make it worth while. That production depends on you. One thing I can promise. Grant Gardner will see that yuh have water." Morgan turned to Gardner. "Want to say somethin', Grant?"

Gardner came to his feet and stepped up beside Morgan.

"When Morgan came to me several months ago," he said, "I was frankly pessimistic about his project. When I saw this valley I changed my mind. I promised him I'd build the reservoir and ditch system if the type of settlers who came here looked like men who would work. Well, boys, you do. I'm an old hand at this business. I know I didn't make a mistake in you, and you didn't make a mistake in trying this valley. I'll make a promise now. By next spring work will start on the ditches, and as many reservoirs as we find necessary."

The clapping was perfunctory. Morgan waited until the scattered applause died. The feeling was wrong. Suspicion rose from this closely packed crowd of men and pressed against him. Dynamite was here, and the fuse was attached.

Cole's contemptuous smile was a steady, constant thing. His face was a magnet that drew Morgan's gaze. Morgan's lips tightened. Jaw muscles bulged. He was to close to the fulfillment of a dream to let it die.

"One more thing before we start the drawin'," Morgan went on. "The matter of doin' away with the biddin' and makin' this drawin' a lottery was brought up by the trustees. We're willin' to grant yore request, but Uncle Sam ain't." He motioned toward Bartell. "We have a post office inspector with us who will remain for the length of the drawin'. The minute we take away the right to bid he'll close us down, so I have a request to make. Don't take advantage of the opportunity to bid. Accept yore tract of land as it is drawn. We don't want more than the price of yore contract. If there is biddin' and the prices run over two hundred dollars, the balance will be divided and refunded to yuh."

Cole jerked forward, suddenly sober, the scornful smile swept from his lips. A sense of triumph surged through Morgan. He had cut away much of the ground from which Cole had expected to launch his attack.

"The procedure of the drawin' has been explained, so I won't repeat it," Morgan hurried on. "We have two ladies on the platform—Miss Peg Royce and Miss Jewell Clancy—who will make the drawin'. Grant Gardner will do the

auctionin'. We promised to pay the travelin' expenses and give twenty-five dollars for yore livin' expenses while here to any of yuh who represent twenty or more contracts. If yuh've got that comin' and haven't collected, visit the cashier in our main office and yuh'll be paid."

XXI

SENSING a change sweep over the crowd, Morgan paused. Despite the doubts and suspicions that Royce and Blazer had planted, these men wanted to believe in the inherent fairness of the company, and Morgan had convinced them.

Cole, Morgan saw, sensed that same intangible tide sweeping the crowd. He was hunched forward, his gaze fixed on Morgan, his eyes bright and wicked and entirely lacking their usual guile.

Swinging to Gardner who had stepped back, Morgan said:

"All right, Grant."

Morgan stepped down from the platform and joined Purdy. The lawman laid a hand on Morgan's shoulder.

"I didn't know yuh was a public speaker, Murdo."

"Shucks, I'm not," Morgan said sheepishly. "For a minute there I couldn't have told yuh my name."

Purdy laughed softly. "I saw yuh look at Jewell, and everything came back. I think yuh licked Cole on that business of biddin'."

"He looks licked," Morgan said, and turned his gaze to Gardner.

"You have your clearance receipt, men," Gardner was saying in crisp businesslike tones. "As soon as your name is called, or if you are acting for an absent contract holder, make your bid for two hundred dollars. If I knock the tract off to you, come around to the back of the platform, pay the balance you owe the company, and you will be given your papers.

"Yesterday we had a conference with the trustees. They requested that if any errors are found in the titles they should be corrected at company expense and that the company make the deeds to the contract holders instead of the trustees as stated in the contract. The company has accepted those changes."

Gardner moved around Jewell's chair and stood between her and Peg.

"In one box we have slips of paper with the number and acreage of each tract," he said. "They have been well shaken, but it won't hurt to give them another mixing." He handed Peg's box to Frawley. "Shake yourself a good piece of land, Mr. Trustee, and hand the box on to Mr. Dalton."

"Why now," Frawley said, "if I shake myself a good piece of land, Dalton there will shake it back down."

A man in the front row laughed, a tight, high laugh, the kind of laugh that comes out of a man when his nerves have become so taut they must have release. It became a contagion, sweeping through the crowd like a spring wind. Men roared and slapped each other on the back and wiped the tears out of their eyes.

"It wasn't funny," Purdy observed. "It's just men gettin' their feet on the ground after bein' up in the air. A good study of how crowds act, Murdo."

Gardner took Peg's box and handed Jewell's to Frawley. Peg said something and for the first time Frawley seemed aware of her. He shook the box and handed it to Dalton, his eyes on Peg, frankly admiring her.

Dalton and then Jale Miller shook the box and Gardner placed it in front of Jewell.

"All right, Miss Clancy." Gardner paused dramatically. "Make the first draw."

Jewell's hand slid through a small opening in the side of the box. She drew out a slip and read:

"Hans Schottle."

"Hans Schottle!" Gardner called, motioning for a secretary behind him to write the name on a long sheet of paper. "Now the tract, Miss Royce."

Peg drew a slip and read:

"Tract Number three thousand, nine

hundred and fifty-six—twenty acres."

"Tract Number three thousand, nine hundred and fifty-six—twenty acres!" Gardner called. "Make your bid, Mr. Schottle."

A paunchy man near the middle aisle rose and called:

"Two hundred dollars!"

"I am bid two hundred dollars," Gardner intoned. "Two hundred dollars. Two hundred dollars. Two hundred dollars for twenty good acres. Are you all done?"

"No." Short John Clancy was standing on the left side of the tent, his buckaroos forming a tight knot behind him. "I bid one thousand dollars."

Murdo Morgan stepped away from the platform, confidence washing out of him. This was Broad Clancy's trick, and Cole and his bunch were here to see that it worked.

SILENCE gripped the crowd. One thousand dollars! Broad Clancy had that kind of money. None of the settlers did. Fear gripped them. Then bitterness. The things that Royce and Blazer had said were right. Clancy would use his money to secure title to the land he had used for years.

For that one short moment Morgan didn't know what to expect and he didn't know what to do. He took an uncertain step along the platform, hand on gun-butt.

"Mr. Clancy," he heard Gardner say, "isn't that bid out of line with the value of the tract?"

"No!" Short John bawled. "It's got our house on it. I ain't sittin' here and lettin' a clodbuster named Hans Schottle have it!"

"You're mistaken, Mr. Clancy," Gardner said. "Tract Number three thousand, nine hundred and fifty-six —"

Blazer was on his feet, bull voice roaring down Gardner's:

"We told you boys what the company was! A thievin' bunch of coyotes!"

Royce jumped onto a bench and was shaking a fist at Gardner.

"Look at him! Fillin' his pockets with honest men's money like he always has. Fixed it with the Clancys so you boys won't get the good spots the cattlemen want. Yuh're just farmers. The company and the Clancys are in together."

"What about it, Schottle?" Blazer bawled. "Yuh goin' to stand for it?"

Morgan had started through the crowd toward Cole and his men, shoulder smashing a path, gun gripped in his right hand. He couldn't shoot in this packed mass, but if he could get to the men who were making the trouble, he would silence them.

"Shore we're in cahoots with the company!" Short John was yelling. "A purty penny it cost us, too. You saw it was my sister who pulled Schottle's name out!"

There wasn't any sense in what Short John was saying, but it wouldn't take sense to turn these men into a pack of howling wolves.

"I'll get a rope!" Blazer was yelling. "Swing 'em and let 'em dance!"

Gardner was trying to talk from the platform. The trustees were beside him, but their voices were lost in the rumble that rose from a thousand throats. Morgan got through the first two rows of men, and no farther. The settlers closed up into a solid wall and began pushing toward the platform.

Blazer and the Sneeds, with Cole and Royce behind them, were jamming their way to the end of the benches toward the canvas.

"Wait'll I get a rope!" Blazer was bellowing. Morgan couldn't reach them. He was being pushed toward the platform, the distance between him and Cole steadily widening.

Through a sudden lull in the roar of the crowd Morgan heard Jewell's voice:

"You were lying, John! Tell them you were lying."

Morgan looked back at the platform. Jewell was on the ground trying to reach Short John. As Morgan looked, she went down.

In that moment Murdo Morgan became a madman. He wheeled toward the platform, his gun-barrel a terrible slashing club. Men spilled out of his way, cursing and crying out in agony.

He was in the clear then. Dalton had seen Jewell and was bellowing:

"Look out, yuh fools! Yuh'll tromp the girl to death."

Morgan jumped to the platform and raced along it. Gardner and his office crew had picked up chairs and lined the edge of the platform to hold the settlers back, a thin line that would have broken under the mob's weight the minute it surged across the platform. Dalton and Frawley were fighting their way toward Jewell when Morgan took a long, flying leap into the crowd, the swinging gun-barrel opening a path for him.

"Look out for the girl!" Dalton kept crying.

Something stopped the forward push of the crowd. Morgan never knew what it was. Dalton's voice or his own gun-barrel or the fact that Blazer was not there to urge them on. The settlers stood motionless, bewildered, those in front of Jewell breaking away from her.

THEN Morgan saw that Purdy was already there, with Jewell on the ground below him. The sheriff's face was battered, his nose was bleeding, his glasses had been torn from his eyes, but his gun-barrel had been as formidable a weapon in his hands as Morgan's had been. Somehow he had kept them away from Jewell.

"All right, all right!" Dalton and Frawley were shouting. "Sit down. We'll see if anything's wrong."

Slowly the crowd fell back. Men looked at each other, not sure why they had done what they had. Morgan lifted Jewell's still form in his arms, his high-boned face squeezed by the passionate fury that was in him.

"I'm takin' her to the doc!" he called. "If she ain't all right, I'm comin' back. You and all the land in the world ain't worth her little finger!"

That finished it. Jewell's head rested against Morgan's chest, her face white, her wheat-gold hair cascading around her face. Shame was in them then. They sat down, the only sound in the big tent the shuffling of feet and squirming of bodies as they found their places on the benches.

"Clancy," Purdy said evenly, "yuh're under arrest for incitin' a riot."

Morgan was striding down the middle aisle carrying Jewell when he heard Gardner call:

"Clancy, tell these men you were lying when you said you were in cahoots with the company."

"All right, I lied." Short John's voice was high-pitched and laden with fear. "We fixed it with Ed Cole for —"

That was all Morgan heard. He was out of the tent, running around the back of the store and across the street and along the front of the Silver Spur to Doc Velie's office. He kicked the door open, and Velie rushed out of the back.

"What the devil's going on?" he bawled. Then he saw Jewell. "Here Morgan," he said, "on this cot. What happened?"

Morgan told him while the doctor made his examination.

"No bones broken," Velie said then, "and I don't think she's hurt. I'd say she got cracked by somebody's fist and was knocked cold. You never know what happens in a mess like that."

"Do somethin'," Morgan cried. "Don't stand there like a fool!"

"All right," Velie said crustily. "I'll do something if you don't shut up. I'll hit you over the head and let you see how you come out of it."

Morgan subsided. He looked down at Jewell's white face, a great emptiness opening inside him. She was breathing softly and evenly. Then she stirred and her eyes came open.

"Yuh're all right?" Morgan bent over her, hand touching her face. "Yuh're all right?"

"I'm all right," she breathed. "Is it —"

"Everything's fine." Morgan choked and turned away. "Keep her there, Doc. She's not doin' any more drawin'."

The drum of running horses came to Morgan when he reached the street. He raced along the boardwalk to the Silver Spur. He saw them on the road to the north rim—five riders, with the dust rolling behind them. Ed Cole and his

bunch, their horses on a dead run.

Morgan started toward the stable for his black and knew it would take too long. There were horses racked along the street. He had wheeled toward a buckskin when Purdy came around the store with Short John Clancy in front of him, a gun prodding his back.

Morgan's place was in town. This was what it would take to set old Broad off.

"Yuh're raisin' old Nick," Morgan said, swinging in beside Purdy.

Purdy peered at him, pale eyes blinking. "I aim to," he said. "You know how close that was?"

"I know how close it was for Jewell," Morgan said bitterly "Yuh saved her life, Abel."

PURDY didn't say anything until the cell door was locked behind Short John. He fumbled in his desk until he found another pair of glasses and put them on. He sat down as if suddenly and terribly tired.

"Nobody needs to thank me for what I've done," he said then, "but I've been wantin' to thank you. Broad Clancy didn't build his walls high enough. Time caught up with him. Nothin' can stop the land sale now. Cole and Blazer and the rest came back with ropes, but they were mighty surprised when they looked into the tent. They turned around and vamosed without a word."

Purdy wiped blood from his face and wadded up his handkerchief.

"I was in torment when you came, Murdo. Lost my nerve. Sold out to Clancy like the rest of them, but the difference with me was that I knew better. Jewell and I used to talk about things before you came."

Turning in his swivel chair, Purdy reached for his pipe.

"I'll never be the same again. Neither will the valley. I wasn't proud of myself six months ago. I am now. I've quit tellin' myself I'm doin' the only thing I could. Security!" He laughed shortly as he dribbled tobacco into his pipe. "It's a bad bargain when anybody sells out for somethin' they think is security. Now you get over to the tent and stay in town. This ain't finished."

"What about the Turkey Track hands who were with Short John?"

"Rode out. Went to tell Broad how it went, I guess."

XXII

NOT fully understanding what had gone on inside Purdy, but feeling a little of the new pride that was in the man, Morgan walked back to the tent. Gardner was on the platform, talking in a low, tense voice, but it was so quiet that his words came clearly to Morgan in the back.

"That's the story of Josh Morgan and his boys who are buried at Jim Carrick's place. It's the story of what Murdo Morgan has tried to do for you, but that part of the story won't be finished until your hands are on the plow handles and you've turned the soil of this valley. You've repaid Morgan by suspicions and . . . Well, I don't need to tell you what you've done. If you'd boiled over this platform a while ago the way you intended, and messed up our records and maybe hanged Morgan and me, you'd have finished the land sale. That was what Ed Cole and Broad Clancy have been working for. They played it smart and took you for suckers. Now let's get one thing straight. What's it going to be from here on?"

Frawley faced Gardner.

"There will be no more trouble of our makin', Mr. Gardner," he said without hesitation. "Let's get on with the drawin'."

"That's what I want to hear." Seeing Morgan in the back, Gardner called, "How's Miss Clancy?"

"Doc said she was knocked out. She'll be all right."

"Then we have something to be thankful for. Frawley, one of you trustees will have to draw in place of Miss Clancy."

"I will," Frawley said, and took the chair beside Peg.

"Clancy withdrew his bid on Tract Number three thousand, nine hundred and fifty-six," Gardner said. "Are you

all done? Sold to Hans Schottle for the contract price of two hundred dollars. Schottle, come to the rear of the platform, pay the balance and receive your papers. All right, Frawley."

Frawley lifted a piece of paper and read, "Joseph Ramsay."

Peg drew and called:

"Tract Number eight hundred and ninety-nine—forty acres."

"Two hundred dollars," a man in the back shouted.

"I am bid two hundred dollars for Tract Number eight hundred and ninety-nine," Gardner intoned. "Two hundred dollars. Two hundred dollars. Two hundred dollars for forty good acres. Are you all done? Sold for the contract price of two hundred dollars. Who is the buyer?"

"Joseph Ramsay."

"Come to the back of the platform and pay your balance and receive your papers. Next, Mr. Frawley."

Morgan turned away. From now on it would go like clockwork. He walked back to Velie's office.

"She's all right," the medico said. "She went over to the hotel."

Morgan drifted aimlessly along the street, watching the clouds rush in from the southwest, smelling the pungent sage scent that was swept in by the damp breeze. It was raining now in the Sunsets and probably on west to the Cascades.

At noon Morgan met Peg and took her to dinner in the tent restaurant.

"Dalton took my place while I'm eating," she said.

"You don't need to go back. Not after what happened."

"I told you the platform was a good place to watch from." She spooned sugar into her coffee, her eyes not meeting Morgan's. "I'm glad it happened. I've got some things straight now. You see, I've never liked Jewell. She had the things I didn't, and they were the things I thought I wanted." She raised her gaze to Morgan's face. "Maybe I had more fun than Jewell did, but fun isn't so important. I could have gone to San Francisco with Cole. I took his money, but I robbed him because all the time I was loving you. It's all right, Murdo. I didn't get the winning hand, but I got a good one. I'll marry Buck. I'll make him happy, and I'll make Jim like me."

Purdy had said, "Time is a great sea washing in around us." He might have added that it changed people as it washed in. These months since Morgan had returned to the valley had been violent ones, twisting and shaping and melting human souls in life's hot crucible, but no one had changed more than Peg Royce.

LOOKING at her now, Morgan felt an admiration for her he had never felt before. She was smiling as if pleased with herself and her life. She had no regrets.

"What happened to you?" Morgan asked.

"Two things," Peg answered. "I know Jewell now, and I like her. I like courage in anybody and she had all the courage in the world when she headed into that crowd."

"The other thing?"

"I saw your face when you crossed the platform to her. She's your final woman, Murdo. Don't let her go."

"Her father happens to be Broad Clancy," he said bitterly.

"You crazy fool! It doesn't make any difference who her father is if you love her."

Maybe he was a crazy fool, but it did make a difference. That was the way life had dealt the cards, and it was beyond his power to change the deal.

Morgan went back to the tent with Peg, watched the drawing, and drifted away. Finding Ed Cole was his job, and he didn't know where to look. The man wasn't finished. He wouldn't be finished until he was dead. Cole would find Clancy, and the Turkey Track man would throw his crew in with Cole's.

Putting himself in their position, it seemed to Morgan that the natural move for them to make would be to break Short John out of jail. Likely the next would be an attack on the settlers' camp. The situation had become critical for Clancy and Cole, and they

were the kind of men who would make a desperate move now that failure had blocked their progress.

The drawing was closed at nine o'clock, the money locked in the safe of the Stockmen's Bank.

"They'll try the bank, Morgan," Gardner said. "If they can get your money, you can't pay the Citizens' Bank, and it will get the grant."

"By that time the land will be sold," Morgan said. "If that was Cole's idea, he'd wait till the finish, but we'll put the Carricks in the bank just to be sure."

Morgan cruised the street, tense, ears keening the night breeze for any sound that was wrong. He wanted to see Jewell, but he had kept away from her after she had gone to the hotel. If he saw her, he would tell her he loved her, and he shouldn't. Not yet. Not until it was finished. Perhaps he never could. Not if Broad Clancy died before his gun.

It was black dark now except for the transient veins of lightning that lashed the sky. Clouds had wrapped a thin moon and the stars in a thick covering. Thunder was an irregular rumble, growing louder with the passage of time. By midnight the settlers were asleep, their fires dull red eyes in the night.

Jim and Buck Carrick were guarding the bank, Purdy was awake in his office, an array of rifles and hand guns on his desk. The waiting pressed Morgan, tightened his already taut nerves until every sound in the darkness made him jump, hand dropping to gun butt.

It was nearly dawn when Morgan stepped into Purdy's office.

"I'll be singing to myself if this doesn't crack," he growled. "And I don't sing worth a hoot."

Purdy leaned back in his chair, forehead worry-lined. "Why are yuh so shore they'll move in tonight?"

"I know Broad. Cole is the kind who might quit, but Broad won't. It's like Jewell says. It's all or nothin' with him."

"But why tonight?"

Morgan jerked a thumb at the cell door. "There's yore answer. Broad's got patience. He's let it play along, gamblin' that the ruckus at the drawin' would do the job, but it didn't work. Now Short John's in the jug. That's too much for a Clancy."

Purdy nodded. "I told yuh this mornin' it was an interestin' study. Do yuh know why that bunch didn't rush in like Cole and Clancy expected?"

"No. I've wondered about it all day. They acted like they was only half convinced."

"That's it. You swung 'em yore way when yuh made yore talk. They couldn't swing back fast enough. If Clancy and Cole could have pulled that off sooner, it would have been a different story."

"It was time we had luck." Morgan turned to the door. "I'm goin' to ride out to the camp. I should have told Dalton to put out a guard."

MORGAN got his black from the stable and rode around the Silver Spur and past the hay stacks to Dalton's wagon. The three trustees were crouched around the fire, and when Morgan rode up, they rose.

"Get down, Morgan," Frawley said. "I couldn't sleep, thinkin' about what happened when yuh started the drawin', so I got Jale and Clay out of bed. We'd like to make it up."

A gun cracked to the south. Then another. Men yelled and thunder rolled into the man-made racket. Morgan's head lifted. A new noise washed in on the night wind, a noise he had not heard for years. The rumble of many hoofs beating into the dirt.

"Stampede!" Morgan cried. "Get everybody out of bed."

He swung his black around the wagon and cracked the steel to him, fear for the settlers' safety freezing his insides. This was Broad Clancy's ace in the hole!

A sliver of pale sky showed where the clouds broke away from the moon. Then it closed and it was completely dark again and thunder came with gun-sharp nearness. It began to rain, great slapping threads that plopped into the earth. Lightning scorched the sky as

Morgan swung his black toward the leaders of the stampede.

He could not think or plan. He could only pray that he could turn the herd, for at such a time man is a puny thing, dependent for life on heaven above and the horse between his legs. Four thousand hoofs! A million pounds of bone and muscle and horns! A wave of destruction, sweeping toward the settlers' camp!

There were women and children, men who had followed a dream half the width of a continent, men who had committed no greater crime than to challenge Broad Clancy for the land he had used, land he did not own, land for which he had not even paid a paltry rent.

The last bit of restraint went out of Murdo Morgan. He'd had opportunities to kill Broad Clancy, and now he regretted those chances which had been lost. But he had never thought Clancy would become a wholesale killer. Yet Clancy must have planned this from the first, or he would not have brought a herd of this size to the valley from the summer range.

Morgan was in close now, the black's speed matching the speed of the steers. Morgan's gun bellowed, powder flame streaking into the night, the noise of the explosion lost in the thunder above and the thunder of hoofs beside him, the blazing ribbon lashing from gun muzzle no more than a match spark in a world lighted by crackling flashes above.

Pull trigger. Throw bullets into the lead animals. Load and shoot again until the gun is empty. Build a row of dead steers. Press and push and hope that the raging line of destruction can be turned away from the camp! Hope that the black will not find a hole and fall, for nothing but death awaited a rider who went down beneath those driving hoofs.

It was wild and primitive, a world without order, chaos that had broken its bonds, death rolling across an earth that trembled under those hoofs with only a single man to avert that fate.

Then the miracle! Other men rode out of the night. More guns to flash, more men to yell and strike with coiled ropes and press the end of that heaving black horde, more men to turn them into the empty land where they could run until they couldn't run, more men to bind and lash this chaos into order. There would be safety only when breath was gone and hearts could no longer pound movement into those lumbering bodies.

The pressure was enough. The line was turned, the direction changed. Not much, but enough. Away from the canvas-topped wagons, away from campfires that had been replenished with dry wood and raced upward into the rain with long sizzling banners of flame, away from the agony cries of mortal terror as women and children tried to flee to safety.

The wagons flashed by. The town was behind. Somewhere out there the steers would stop when they could go no farther.

Morgan reined away and stopped. He stepped down from his heaving horse and loaded his gun. Daylight was washing out across the valley now. It had not been long since the stampede had started, but each minute had been an eternity, minutes when hundreds of lives had depended upon every crawling second.

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THERE was no direction to Murdo Morgan's thoughts as he stood there in the rain. Only a consciousness of guilt for letting Broad Clancy live, but Morgan would not be guilty much longer. Most of the riders were staying with the herd. They were not pressing the leaders, but had pulled away and slowed their mounts. Later the steers would be brought back, but two men had turned and were riding directly at Morgan.

For a time Morgan thought the riders were Broad Clancy and Short John, but the light was thin in the misty air and when they were close he saw that they were not the Clancys. They reined up.

"Put up yore gun, Morgan," one said. "Yuh'll have no trouble with us."

"Where's Clancy?" Morgan asked.

"Short John's dead," the rider said—

a Turkey Track rider, Morgan realized then. "Mebbe Broad is by this time."

Morgan was silent for a moment, his mind gripping this and failing to understand it.

"What happened?" he asked.

"We broke Short John out of jail," the buckaroo said. "Purdy got tagged, but he'll live. We left town when we heard the stampede, and ran into Cole's bunch at the edge of the camp. Broad cussed Cole for startin' it, and Cole said they aimed to smash the nester camp. Broad called it killin' and pulled. Pete Royce got him. There was some shootin'. We got the Sneeds and one of 'em drilled Short John. Cole sloped out with Royce and Blazer. Broad told us to turn the stampede away from the camp."

XXIII

RAIN was lashing Morgan's face as he stared at the men. Slowly his gun slid back into holster. It made less than sense, but the Turkey Track man was telling the truth. Morgan saw it in his face. There was no reason now for him to lie.

"We'll slope along," the rider said. "Broad wanted us to tell you if we saw you. He's in town now, I reckon, if he ain't cashed in. A couple of the boys took him to the hotel."

"Thanks," Morgan said.

Mounting, he let the black take his own pace to town.

It was full daylight when Morgan reached Irish Bend. The storm was over except for a drizzle that was more mist than rain. He rode slowly along the street, saw Broad Clancy's chestnut racked in front of the hotel and tied beside him.

There was a strange stillness upon the town. Morgan remembered the hot spring day when he had first returned to the valley, a day that now seemed years ago. There had been silence then, the hostile silence with which Broad Clancy's Irish Bend used to welcome strangers. This was different. It was a brooding silence, filled with human fears.

Morgan stepped through the mud to the wet walk and stood there a moment. The sun, low over the Hagerman Hills to the east, broke through the shifting clouds and gave a hard brightness to the street. Steam curled up from the soaked earth and roofs and boardwalks, and strong and pungent desert smells flowed around Morgan.

No one else was on the street. No horses were racked along it but the two in front of the hotel. A rooster crowed from somewhere back of Doc Velie's office, the shrill sound beating into the silence. Then the stillness was upon the town again. It was as if Nature, outraged for so long by the plots and counterplots of scheming selfish men, had decreed that this would be the end.

Morgan paced toward the bank and stopped. Peg Royce stepped out of the hotel.

"Murdo!" she called. "Come inside before they shoot you!"

He didn't move. "Where's Cole?" he asked.

"In the Elite. Blazer's with him. Royce is dead. Jim Carrick got him. Jim's hit, but he'll be all right."

The Elite was straight ahead, past the bank and across the side street. The minute Morgan rounded the front of the bank, they would cut him down. Still he waited, considering this.

"Where's Buck?" he asked.

"Still in the bank."

That would have been like Jim Carrick, to stay where he had been stationed until the danger was over. It wasn't Buck's way, and Morgan didn't like the idea of young Carrick being behind him, but it couldn't be helped. He started on. Peg ran after him and caught his arm.

"They'll kill you!"

He shook her off and kept on until he reached the corner. There he pressed against the bank wall and called:

"Ed! Come out, or I'm comin' after yuh!"

"Wait, Murdo." Peg stepped behind him and into the bank. "Buck, Morgan needs help."

There was no answering cry from the Elite. Morgan drew his gun and sent

a shot through the side of the saloon.

"Come out, Ed! You, too, Blazer."

Behind him, Buck Carrick laughed. "Why'n thunder should I help Morgan? You got things plumb wrong, Peg."

"I won't marry you unless you help him, Buck."

Morgan heard young Carrick's long breath. "You'll marry me if I help Morgan?"

"I promise."

"Don't, Peg!" Morgan said without turning. "I'll wait 'em out."

"Shut up, Morgan," Buck snarled. "I'll make my own bargain. Peg, I thought yuh loved Morgan."

"Not any more. Buck, you'll never regret it. I promise. Jim won't either."

"Don't, Peg!" Morgan cried out. "Don't throw yoreself away on a man you don't love."

MORGAN lunged across the street, gun in his hand. He was in the open, mud sloshing under his boots. He was across to the other walk then and Blazer and Cole were stumbling through the door. Morgan didn't understand it. He fired once. Blazer's gun was lifted, but the hammer didn't fall. He bent with Morgan's bullet in his stomach. He swayed uncertainly, hanging to life with grim tenacity, then the last of his life went into the trigger pull, his shot spilling wildly across the street.

Ed Cole was jerking frantically at his gun. It came out from under his coat, pathetically slow, for this was not his game and he was scared. He had depended on Arch Blazer, and the big man had failed him. There was no guile now in his blue eyes nor on his handsome face. There was a wolfish rage in him, and the fear of a wolf that had been separated from his pack and can run no longer.

Morgan's gun was lined on Cole, finger slack against the trigger. Thoughts slid through his mind, thoughts of this man he had called friend, thoughts of the past when they had fought side by side, of his visit to Cole's San Francisco office and the loan Cole had obtained for him.

"Shoot him!" Peg screamed. "There's nothing worth saving in him!"

Cole's gun was in his hand now. Morgan thought of the stampede, of the women and children in the settlers' camp. He had seen stampedes. He had seen the bloody shapeless things that had been men before they had gone down under thundering hoofs.

It was enough. He pulled trigger, felt the breath of Cole's bullet on his cheek. Then Cole dropped his gun, hands gripping his shirt front. He wanted to say something. His lips framed a word but the sound that came from his throat was not a word. The agony of death was in his face and shock and disbelief as if he had been sure through all of it that he would never be brought to this place. He fell across the walk and his blood made a dark pattern on the wet boards.

Then Morgan understood. Dalton and Frawley and Gardner and a dozen settlers boiled through the door to form a circle around the bodies.

"We were forted up behind the saloon," Dalton said, "waiting for some more of the boys. Then we saw you cross the street and knew we had to do somethin', so we slammed the back door in." He scratched his chin, staring down at Cole. "Queer, ain't it? Both him and Clancy had all they needed, but it wasn't enough. Now they've got nothin'."

"Why did Cole stop to fight?" Morgan asked.

"He couldn't get away," Frawley answered. "Royce got hit when they tangled with Clancy's bunch, and they brought him to the doc. Jim Carrick blowed Royce's brains out and we circled the town. Cole and Blazer holed up in here."

Perhaps it was that way, but Morgan knew how it was with a man after he had schemed and failed and run. Any man can run so long. Then he can't run. It had to be ended, one way or the other, and Ed Cole had died like a man.

"Thanks," Morgan said.

He put his gun back in his holster, suddenly tired and sleepy and a little

bitter. These men didn't understand. They never would. Not until this morning had they tried to fight, but fighting was what he was made for. There would always be the little men who needed their fighting done for them. That was the way the world moved forward. Only now and then would he find a Jim Carrick or an Abel Purdy who had within his soul the courage to stand and fight.

"Why," Frawley said, pleased, "I guess yuh've got no reason to be thankin' us. Not after what you done."

"We'll get the drawing started, Morgan," Gardner said.

It didn't seem very important to Morgan then. The important part had been done.

"Take care of them," he said, nodding at the bodies, and turned away.

BUCK CARRICK was standing in front of the bank, his arm around Peg.

When Morgan crossed the street to them, Buck tried desperately to hold his dignity.

"Why didn't yuh wait, Morgan? I'd have given yuh a hand."

"I do my own snake stompin'," Morgan said. He stared at Jim Carrick's son who had hated him since that night at the Smith shack. Now Morgan felt sorry for Peg, he felt sorry for Jim. "She's got no call to marry yuh, Buck, if she don't love yuh. She deserves somethin' better."

"Now hold on—" Buck began.

"I had some things wrong," Peg broke in. She stood tall and straight, as cool and beautiful as carved ivory. "I lost my head about you, Murdo. Let's forget that. It was different this morning. I helped you because I wanted Buck to own the land he lived on, the land I'm going to live on." She smiled, but it was not the confident smile Morgan had seen on her lips before. "Broad died a little bit ago. Jewell will want to see you."

Morgan, looking closely at Peg, knew it was all right with her. Yesterday she had said she would make Buck happy and she would make Jim like her. She had meant it then and she meant what she said now.

He went on, the desire to sleep a million years pressing him, but he couldn't sleep yet. Jewell wanted to see him. Funny, the way it had gone. All the time he had thought he would have to kill Broad Clancy. Then Jewell would be beyond his reach, for that was a thing even love could not bridge. But Clancy had died before the guns of Ed Cole and his men.

He was in the hotel lobby then and Jewell was behind the desk as she had been that first day he had seen her. He paused and looked at her and thought of the things he had noticed then—of the eagerness in her blue eyes, her quick-smiling lips, her throaty laugh. But nobody had laughed much lately in Paradise Valley. The years ahead would be different. He might do some laughing himself.

"Dad's dead," she said. "Everything he had wanted was gone, but he said to tell you he didn't hate you. He hoped you didn't hate him. He brought that herd down to run through the big tent if everything else failed. He would have burned the town and your records and he aimed to kill you and Gardner, but he couldn't stand for Cole stampeding the cattle into the camp. He said he had never fought women and children. He was honest in what he believed. You believe that, don't you, Murdo? Can you forgive him for what happened to your father and your brothers?"

"I didn't come back to get square, Jewell."

She hadn't been crying, but now there were tears in her eyes. She rubbed them away.

"I know, Murdo," she said a little angrily, "and I'm not crying for him. I'm crying because of what he might have been, and what he might have done. I think he saw it himself that last minute. He said he had lost Rip. He had lost me. Then he made Short John come to the drawing to do what Rip would have done if he had been alive, and he lost Short John. He didn't care if he lived or died. It was too late."

Morgan thought briefly of his own

father who had dreamed his dreams to the last. He thought of Abel Purdy who had said that time was a great sea washing around them. Now everything was different. He looked at this girl who had missed so much of the goodness of life.

"It's not too late," he said.

"What will you do now?" she asked.

"I kept back a piece of the butte land south of the valley. We could homestead the quarters between my land so we'd have patent to enough to know we could hang on no matter what happens. Seems like this valley's got a big chunk of me. I'd like to stay here. Would you?"

"Yes, Murdo. That's what I'd like to do."

He came to her and she moved away from the desk to meet him. He kissed her and her lips were warm and rich. She had never given the fullness of her love to anyone, but she gave it now, and Morgan, holding her in his arms, had a brief glimpse of the years ahead. They were inviting years, as winey and headstirring as the cool thin air of the valley.

She pulled her lips away and clung to him, her body hard against his, and in all the changes that the great sea washing in around them had brought, none was as fine as this.

BACK FROM THE DEAD

The Story of the Musk Ox

By LEW MARTIN

LIKE the buffalo, the Alaskan musk ox was almost sent into oblivion by the hungry, cold, and money-greedy white man. Once the shaggy beast roamed the icy wastes between the sixtieth and the eightieth parallel in great numbers.

Their peculiar odor—a musk scent emanating from their hides and not from musk glands—attracted bears and wolves, but the bulls of the herds would form themselves in a battle ring, their horns lowered, and protect the cows and the young. And so the oxen survived until the explorer and miner came with deadly guns.

When the Bureau of Biological Survey—later the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—decided to find musk oxen and establish herds once again, it was necessary to send to Greenland. It was a 14,000 mile trek to Alaska.

Fifteen males and nineteen females arrived aboard a ship that almost foundered.

It was found that females don't breed until their fourth year and the gestation period is eight months. Four of the herd died in the first two years, but eight calves were born. Mosquitos, oddly enough, caused the beasts a great deal of trouble. Their worst enemy, the bear, was kept at a distance.

The wild ox can best be described as occupying a position half way between a goat and our domestic cattle. The bulls weigh from seven hundred to eight hundred pounds, while cows weigh nearer five hundred. Their backs are slightly humped, their bodies barrel-shaped, tails short and ratlike, shoulders blessed with hair as curly as caracul. Their legs, though stubby, can take the animals with the speed of wind over snowy ground.

Oddly enough, the musk oxen have been undergoing a change since the Ice Age departed and the North became more temperate. A short, light brown fur, plus an overgarment of long dark brown hair, coarse and matted, has grown onto him. This, with a hide tougher than a buffalo's, enables the musk ox to turn his hind quarters to the weather and like it. His horns became longer in time, and sharper, his hoofs more splayed and sturdier for traversing the crusted snow, and for pawing into it in search of sparse winter fodder—lichen, moss, and saxifrage.

Those who have eaten musk oxen declare the young wild beef more tender than our domestic steer. The cows give milk. Hides make very good leather. The shaggy overhair serves the purpose of commercial mohair admirably.

As for the musky odor, that is found only in the meat of the older bulls when served on the table.

RED BLOOD AND WHITE

A stirring true story of pioneer courage and adventure in the days of the warring, raiding Comanches!

by FREDERICK R. BECHDOLT

PARKER'S FORT, a lonely landmark on the Texas prairie, stood near the headwaters of the Navasota River, sixty miles from the nearest settlement. Nine families lived within the log stockade, thirty-eight souls. They had come here from Illinois three years before—Elder John Parker and his aged wife; five married sons and daughters with their families and Benjamin, a bachelor. The others were relatives by marriage or distant kin.

At sunrise on the morning of May 19, 1838, the double gates swung open and ten men and boys, their faces burned dark by sun and wind and dressed in sap-dyed homespun or smoke-tanned buckskin came out to work in the fields

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a mile away. The newly risen sun glinted on the long barrels of their muzzle-loading rifles. Five able-bodied men had been left in the stockade to guard the women and children.

At nine o'clock a woman's cry brought the men from the cabins on a run. She was pointing through the open gateway. Less than half a mile away six hundred Comanche Indians were riding toward the fort.

Mothers gathered their children and the men got their rifles and hurried to the entrance. They were about to close the double gates when the Comanches halted and a solitary rider came on. He bore an upraised lance from which a patch of white cloth was fluttering.

"I'll go out and talk with him," Benjamin Parker told the others.

His brother, Silas, wanted to close the barrier at once, but Benjamin had his way. He was a Baptist preacher, and these devout people looked up to him. He went to meet the messenger.

Armed Warriors

The other four men waited in the open gateway. Elder John Parker moved among the mothers and children trying to soothe their fears. He was approaching the four-score mark, and had to leave rifles to the younger men.

Finally the Comanche rode back, and Benjamin Parker returned to the stockade.

"They say they are peaceful," he said, "and want to know the way to a waterhole that used to be near here. But I don't like the look of things."

There were no squaws, he said, "the bodies of the warriors were bare, and they were armed with lances.

"I'll go again," he said, "and see if I can't persuade them to pass on by."

He walked out across the prairie with his hand uplifted in the sign of peace.

The Comanches were already advancing, and several warriors rode to meet him. The blade of a lance flashed in the sunlight. Before Benjamin Parker had fallen the prairie was reverberating to the beating of racing hoofs and the shrill ululations of war-whoops. The massacre at Parker's Fort was on.

There was no time to close the gate now. The stockade had become a trap. The only hope lay with the ten men at work in the fields. Elder John Parker, his wife, Mrs. Elizabeth Kellogg, and Sarah Nixon, a daughter of the old couple, ran out to seek help.

More than a mile across the uneven prairie would have been a grueling race for a young man. But they ran on. Sarah Nixon passed the other three, and had just vanished over a rise when the thudding of hoofs grew loud behind the running three. A dozen warriors swept down upon them.

The Comanches reined up. The gaudy pennons on their lances fluttered as the weapons rose. The blades descended, and old John Parker fell dying from a dozen wounds. One of the braves dragged Mrs. Kellogg upon his pony while the others plunged their spears into Granny Parker's body.

The rise had hidden Mrs. Nixon from the Comanches, and she stumbled on to the fields ahead. The men were running toward her. She had breath enough to call the one word: "Indians!"

When Benjamin Parker died out on the prairie the other four men stood in the stockade's entrance awaiting the charge. They could at least delay the savages. The six hundred came on, a huddle of racing ponies and bronze bodies, with here and there the plumes of a war-bonnet tossing in the wind.

The four rifles cracked, and the oncoming ranks wavered. Firearms were formidable weapons in the eyes of the Indians at that time.

Cracking Rifles

Silas Parker saw his sister, Rachael Plummer, running with her baby in her arms. She ran through the gate, and a dozen naked warriors charged down upon her. Parker clubbed his rifle and rushed them, fighting fiercely until they killed him. One of the braves took the woman prisoner, and the rest crowded into the stockade.

Of the three who had stood with Silas Parker two died somewhere near the gateway. The other escaped with his wife and little ones.

The Comanches spread through the inclosure seeking plunder, every buck intent on spoils. They rushed into the cabins dragging forth everything they could lay their hands on, wrestling with one another over the loot. In the confusion, women were seizing the oppor-

tunity to slip away with their children to the open prairie.

Girl of Mystery

Lucy Parker got away with her four little ones—two babies, Cynthia Ann, nine, and six-year-old John. They had gone something less than half a mile when they got sight of L. D. Nixon running toward them from the fields. But Comanches caught up with them, forced the mother to lift John and Cynthia behind one of the mounted warriors, and took Lucy back to the fort.

When the men came from the fields, David Faulkenberry rescued Lucy and her two babies from a score of Comanches. He and two companions held back the savages while the women and children slipped away to the brush in the river bottom. They found Granny Parker that night, living in spite of her wounds, and carried her back to the settlement where she died within the month.

In the hamlets by the Trinity these survivors waited for tidings from the prisoners. Six months later they got the first word. A band of Delawares who had purchased Mrs. Kellogg brought her into Nacogdoches and turned her over to President Sam Houston. A year later William Donoho, a Santa Fe trader, found Mrs. Plummer with some Comanches in Colorado and ransomed her.

In the Fifties news came from Cynthia Ann's brother John. He had grown up among his captors and had become a warrior. In a raid across the Rio Grande they took a Mexican girl, Juanita Espinosa, prisoner. The white youth fell in love with her and soon afterward was stricken with smallpox, whereat the tribe deserted him. But the girl stayed by him, nursing him back to health, and the two made their way to the white settlements.

Lucy Parker died, but the two babies she had saved from the Comanches grew up. One of them, Dan Parker, became a member of the legislature. But no word came from Cynthia Ann Parker save for stories brought by Indian traders of having seen a white girl among the Quahada Comanches. All Texas knew Cynthia Ann's story. . . .

In the summer of 1860 the Comanche tribes formed a confederation to drive white people from the Brazos and near-by streams. They raided ranches, slaying settlers, driving off stock. Every able-bodied man in that part of Texas took his rifle and saddled his pony to go out against them. Among them was young Lawrence Sullivan Ross—Sul Ross they called him.

In after years he became a brigadier-general under the stars and bars, and later was governor of Texas, but ended his days as a college president.

At this time he was just graduated from an Alabama university. His father had been a famous Ranger and had slain the great Comanche chief Big Foot in a hand-to-hand combat on the Llano Estacado, and the son's vacations were spent in fighting Indians. In his sophomore year he commanded a band of friendly warriors in a battle on the False Washita, where more than ninety Comanches were slain. So in this summer of 1860, he got permission from Governor Sam Houston to raise a company of Rangers.

He enrolled sixty men, and they went into camp near Fort Belknap on the old Brazos agency to go after small hostile bands. When winter was beginning the Quahada Comanches made a bloody raid in Jack and Palo Pinto Counties, and Sul Ross took his Rangers to pick up their trail.

The Antelope-Eaters

These Quahadas—"Antelope-Eaters"—were the wildest and most elusive of their nation, and spent most of their time roaming over the Llano Estacado. Their chief, Peta Nocona—"The Wanderer"—was the most famous Comanche since old Big Foot's time.

Young Captain Ross took his forty Rangers and twenty dragoons of the Second U. S. Cavalry and cut the trail of the fleeing Quahadas near the Clear Fork of the Brazos. It led into the country under the escarpments of the Staked Plains.

On the morning of December 18, 1860, they were traveling up the Pease River in the face of a biting north wind. Great clouds of dust hid all the landscape for long intervals. Now and then, in a rift, they got a brief glimpse of the dreary sand-hills with the gnarled shrubs at their summits dancing contortedly in the gale. Or they saw buffalo running clumsily before the wind.

Even in those days when reading signs was as necessary as reading print, many would have taken it for granted that the bison were hunting shelter, but the newly fledged graduate was as thorough a scholar in savage warfare as he was in Latin, and to him the brutes were loping too fast to be drifting.

He told Tom Kellihier, his lieutenant, to hold the company on the lowlands. "I'm going up on that hill to reconnoiter," he said.

When he reached the summit he saw the conical tepees of a Comanche village. It was one of the weak points of the Plains Indians to huddle in their blankets during bad weather. So Sul Ross got his big chance on this bitter December morning by being abroad when the weather was unfit for traveling.

He hurried down the hill and sent a sergeant and the twenty dragoons to the opposite side of the camp, where they were to lie in ambush until the others charged. When the soldiers had had time to reach their position, he gave the word to his Rangers.

A Chief Dies

They swept down on the village and were among the lodges before the Comanches knew what had happened. Squaws shrieked; dogs and children scuttled under the hoofs of the ponies; the voices of the braves rose in shrill war-yells and the rattle of the Texans' rifles came sharp above the uproad. It was more a massacre than a battle. Many Comanche warriors died while reaching for their weapons.

The survivors scattered; every man for himself.

Young Captain Ross found himself racing after a pony that bore two riders. The Texan settled down for a long chase across broken country.

The gale came down upon them. Great clouds of yellow sand filled the air like smoke when the prairie is aflame. The two riders before Ross showed through the saffron haze, swathed in their blankets, and gradually the bigger-boned bronco gained on the pony with its double load.

When there was less than twenty yards between them, Ross raised his cap-and-ball revolver and fired. The rear rider collapsed. It was a young Indian girl.

As she fell she dragged the man with her from his seat. He alighted catlike, and in an instant his bow was out, an arrow on the string.

As he charged, Ross fired again, but missed. The Comanche's arrow struck his horse, and the bronco began bucking wildly. The Texan strove to get another shot from his pitching mount but such rough riding does not go well with good marksmanship and the Indian was making the most of his opportunity. Three of his arrows buzzed by before young Ross could pull the trigger. It was only a snap-shot at that, but it broke the warrior's arm. Before he could throw his lance Ross had put two bullets through his body.

There was a little tree near the summit of a sand-hill, and when the Ranger had managed to dismount from his frenzied horse the Comanche was walking slowly toward it. He leaned against the trunk, facing his slayer, and began chanting his death-song.

The bitter gale flung great clouds of yellow sand about him. The blood-stains spread over his bare torso. He held his jet-black eyes on the white man while his voice rose above the wind's droning, chanting his deeds, the greatness of his people. Those people were scattered in flight now; he was alone, but defiant to the last.

And while he sang, a Mexican who knew the Comanches tongue rode up.

"He is Peta Nocona," the man said. "Their chief."

"Tell him to surrender," Ross ordered, " and that we will not harm him."

But when the Mexican spoke the Comanche thrust so fiercely with his lance that the two men fell back. And so he died.

White Squaw

Ross found his lieutenant, Tom Kellihier, cursing with Texan fluency.

"Look what I got," he growled, and pointed to his captive. "A squaw!"

He told of a long chase and how, when he was about to fire, the fugitive had lifted a baby from her blankets, holding it forth in supplication.

"That's not a squaw, Tom," Ross told him. "Indians don't have blue eyes. That's a white woman."

"Her name is Prelock," the Mexican told them. "Wife of the chief you killed."

"Well, anyhow, she's white," Ross maintained. "And she's weeping. A Comanche woman wouldn't let you see her do that."

"She is weeping for her son, senor," the Mexican went on when he had talked with her. "She fears she will never see him again."

That evening by the campfire the young captain heard her story through the interpreter. She was the widow of the chief. One of her three children had died with the father. She had the youngest here, her baby, Prairie Flower. But her son had been separated from them in the fighting and was gone.

Ross bade the Mexican question her about who her people were, how long she had been among the Comanches. She could tell little. She had lived with this tribe ever since she was a little girl. She did not know English. She had no memory of her family.

"I believe," Ross told Tom Kellihier, "she is Cynthia Ann Parker."

He sent her to Camp Cooper, and left directions that Colonel Isaac Parker, an uncle of the missing girl, be summoned to identify her. The old man came and had a long talk with her through an interpreter. But he could get nothing from her to show who she was. When he was turning away to go he tried a last resort.

"The girl I seek," he said slowly, "is Cynthia Ann."

"Cynthia Ann!" she cried and pointed to herself. "Cynthia Ann!" She had forgotten the name of her family, but the memory of her given name still was with her.

They took her to her brother, Colonel Dan Parker, in Austin, where he was a delegate to the secession convention. When she saw the assemblage she thought it was a gathering of great chiefs deciding on her fate. So she tried to flee, and was trembling like a trapped animal when they gave her to her brother.

He took her to his home, and the women made much of her. Slowly her fears departed; the customs of white people began to replace the Comanche ways; she learned to speak her native tongue once more. But her heart was out on the Llano Estacado with her boy, and she was continually trying to escape and find him.

She lived for only four years, and Prairie Flower died before her. But to the end Cynthia Ann pleaded with the white people to find her boy and bring him to her.

The Boy Mourned

The boy for whom her heart ached so sorely was named Quanah—Fragrance of Flowers. His life proves the fallacy of the old saying that half-breeds are never any good.

The Comanches had no hereditary succession of chiefs. So when Peta Nocona died that day singing his death-song in the sand-hills, and when Prelock was taken by the white men, young Quanah became a waif. He lived on the tribe's charity.

But he got the same schooling as the boys among whom he grew up. He listened to the tales of the old men—legends of animals and birds; traditions of the Comanches dating from the time they separated from their Apache kin to rove the country east of the Llano Estacado; stories of warfare with the bold Cheyennes around the Arkansas River.

He learned to shoot and stalk antelope, to ride after the marvelous fashion of his people, the best horsemen of all the Indians. Hunting and horse-stealing and warfare—he studied to prepare himself for all three of them, and the traditions of his father's race became a part of his nature. He grew to manhood ambitious to make a name for himself as a great warrior.

That ambition and the good blood in his veins made him excel from the beginning. He gained prestige among the youngsters of the tribe and held their allegiance because of his warm heart which gave affection. So he came to his young manhood in the late Sixties with twenty good friends who boasted of his skill and were ready to do anything he asked of them.

Then something happened which gave him opportunity to put that friendship to the test and make his way toward mightier things than hunting or horse-racing.

There was a girl among the Quahadas, Weckeah, the daughter of Chief Yellow Bear. She and Quanah had been playmates, and now the budding warrior learned that their companionship had ripened into love.

A young buck, Tannap, also the son of a chief, came courting Weckeah at twilight after the Comanche fashion. He sat outside old Yellow Bear's tepee and played love-songs on a reed flute. The girl did not show her face, but when the serenade was done and young Quanah came to her with eyes ablaze, she acknowledged her love for Quanah.

Twice afterward the ardent Tannap repeated his visit; and on the fourth night Eckitoap, his father, came. Yellow Bear sat down with him on a buffalo-robe outside the tepee and received the formal offer for his daughter's hand. Ten ponies was the figure, a big price.

The girl told Quanah that evening when they met near the edge of the village, and she was weeping. Love talk could not raise a band of ponies, so young Quanah set off to find his friends.

He put the proposition to them. He had one horse, a good one. If they would furnish the others he would repay them as soon as he was able to steal enough. They brought him all they had, and among the lot were nine which were as fit as his to match the bid of his rival's father.

But when Quanah led his string of ponies to Yellow Bear's tepee old Eckitoap doubled his offer and Yellow Bear accepted. In three days Tannap would take Weckeah away as his bride.

Quanah told the girl to come at moondown to a rendezvous outside the village. They would elope. He had plans which she could see for herself when the time came. It meant his death if they were overtaken, and she would go to Tannap in disgrace.

Stolen Bride

When the moon had set, she stole out to the appointed place and found Quanah waiting with two ponies. A number of dim forms appeared from a little draw. She counted twenty horsemen. As they set off across the prairie, Quanah told her that his friends were going with them. He was their leader now. They had left the tribe.

They rode for seven hours and never slackened save to water their ponies in crossing a stream. When the sun was rising they stopped and let the horses graze while they ate the jerked buffalo meat which they had brought with them.

That night they met at a spot that Quanah had appointed and rested until the moon was down. They journeyed on until they reached Double Mountain where they separated again and made their way in couples to the headwaters of the Concho River.

Here, where the Llano Estacado rises from the lowlands in sheer bluffs, they built their village and went to work at making their living by stealing horses. In the next few months they raided all over western Texas, driving their stolen herds across the Staked Plains and selling them for good prices to the Comancheros who came from Taos and Santa Fé. They prospered under Quanah's leadership and, although they had some brisk brushes with ranchmen and Rangers, they lost only two or three men.

Every now and then one of the band would steal back to the Quahadas, and when the young warrior returned he always brought with him a bride. Usually he came accompanied by three or four bucks whom he had lured away by his tales of raiding. Within a year these accessions had swelled the number of Quanah's followers to above a hundred.

Full-Fledged Chief

In the Quahada village, old Eckitoap one day set forth with a formidable band of warriors to bring the fugitives to justice. The tidings of his coming preceded him, and on the morning when he reached Quanah's camp he found men awaiting him in their war-paint. And the idea of being threshed in a battle against the youngsters who had grown up in their own village appealed to him and his fellow chiefs so little that they sent a herald asking for a parley.

The conference was held, and it was agreed that Quanah should pay nineteen ponies as damages. He turned the horses over, remarking that he knew a ranch where he could steal as many more the next night. The treaty was ratified by feasting and smoking. Both

bands rode northward together, and Quanah took his place among his father's people as a full-fledged chief.

It is said that he was the finest-looking man in all the tribe—tall, straight and well-proportioned, darker than many warriors, and with that dignity which marks the higher types of North American Indian. He was all savage, and during the next few years he showed himself the most relentless leader among the Southwestern nations in warfare against the white men.

General Hancock brought about the Medicine Lodge treaty of 1868 by which the Cheyennes, Kiowas, Apaches, Arapahoes, and most of the Comanches agreed to keep the peace, provided there was no buffalo-hunting south of the Arkansas River. Quanah had risen to be the head chief of the Quahadas, and his influence had much to do with their remaining outside that alliance.

While the other nations were varying the monotony of eating the white man's beef by semi-occasional excursions off their reservations, adding to their collections of white scalps, he remained consistent in his hostility against his mother's people. He took his tribe out on the Llano Estacado, and his warriors ranged about the great plateau, raiding ranches, massacring buffalo-hunters, retreating before the advances of cavalry and Texas Rangers into the wild arid reaches over toward the Peocs River.

The greatest war-chief the Comanches had ever known men called him. And when he had risen to this height events took a strange turn.

In the summer of 1873 a party of buffalo-hunters crossed the Arkansas River and scouted over the forbidden land. Early the next spring a wagon-train left Dodge City, Kansas, and built the hamlet of Adobe Walls near the Canadian in the northeastern portion of the Panhandle. Hide-hunters went forth to establish camps and slay bison herds.

The tribes of the Southwest united in their last great outbreak. The Quahada Comanches kindled the flame that swept from the Indian Territory into Texas and New Mexico.

A medicine-man — I-sa-tai — proclaimed that he had been given divine power by which he could make the guns of the white men impotent. Emissaries, with the tidings, found the Cheyennes, who had once been their enemies, in camp near the head of the Washita River, and offered them the pipe, which they accepted.

The flower of the Comanche warriors, united under Quanah, came for council, decked out in the full panoply of war. I-sa-tai rode at their head, and four chiefs were beside him. They charged down on the Cheyenne village, yelling, circled it and rode in and out among the tepees.

The Cheyennes mounted and went through like manœuvers. Then the chiefs sat down in council, and mapped out their campaign. The initial blow was to be delivered against that lonely outpost at Adobe Walls. Quanah was chosen as the head man of the leaders.

Quanah's Last Campaign

It was his campaign. He had sponsored it in councils of his own people until it had become a part of their religion. The medicine-man's revelation was but a part of the movement, which had originated with Quanah. For he knew that the day had come when either the buffalo-hunters must go or the Indians must subsist on the bounty of the white men.

So, after the warriors had danced all through the night the war party traveled southward. And as they journeyed fighting men from the Kiowas and Apaches overtook them, until their number had swelled to between eight hundred and a thousand.

On the third evening they began the final preparations. They daubed their ponies with paint and tricked them out with highly-colored trappings; they smeared their faces and their bare bodies with ocher and vermillion. They made medicine according to their different rituals.

That night they went in camp down by the Canadian, six or seven miles away from Adobe Walls, where twenty-eight men were sleeping secure in the belief that recent Indian alarms were but the result of a few roving renegades, and that these had departed.

Before dawn the warriors were on their ponies. For the final time I-sa-tai

had told them that the white men's guns would be no better than so many sticks of wood. He climbed a hill near the camp and stood on its summit. Save for a bonnet of sage-stems, he was stark naked.

The warriors waited for the signal he was to give them. The sun was nearly risen when he raised his arm. They swept forward in a long line, and charged down upon the four flimsy buildings, rending the morning air with triumphant war-whoops.

But that charge, which came thundering across the prairie, splendid and terrible, began a day that ended in defeat for the eight hundred. How many died before the Sharp's rifles of the buffalo-hunters is not known. Quanah was struck by a spent bullet, his horse was killed, and he was obliged to ride away behind one of his braves.

When the Indians had retreated into the river bottom a Cheyenne buck sought out I-sa-tai, announcing loudly his intention of flogging the luckless medicine-man.

"Oh, let him go!" the other Cheyennes shouted. And so in scorn they spared him.

Metamorphosis of a Red Man

General Miles came down from Dodge City with a formidable body of troops. He overtook the warriors near the Red River, It was a good fight. They scattered the Indians so thoroughly that there was no more unity among them.

In the spring of '75 Quanah found himself alone with his Quahadas on the Staked Plains. The rest of the Comanches had gone back to the reservations. For another year Quanah waged a hopeless war. But trading-posts were springing up where only savages had ventured. The old days were gone. In 1876 he led his Quahadas back to Fort Sill.

When he surrendered his tribe to General MacKenzie he said:

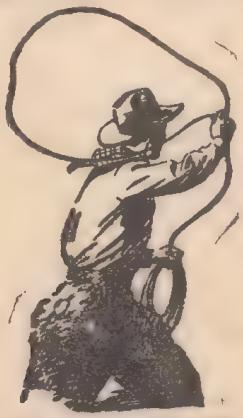
"Now I can go and see my mother." He had remembered the white blood in his veins.

He learned of the mother's death, took her name, and became known as Quanah Parker.

As the red strain had dominated him before, so now the white strain began to show itself. Quanah had been a great war-chief; Quanah Parker became a great leader in peace, canny in business, planning for his people's progress. As for himself, he prospered. He acquired cattle, horses, and good fields; he built a house of thirty rooms near where the town of Parker stands today.

When President Theodore Roosevelt came West for his big wolf-hunt Quanah Parker went with him as a guest. He was proud of that; proud of his possessions, of his great white house and his blooded horses. But he took the greatest pride in a painting of Cynthia Ann Parker which hung above the organ in the parlor.

When in 1911 he died, he was buried beside her. So in the end he came to her.



COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE FIRST COWBOY

Another Colorful True Story by FREDERICK R. BECHDOLT

A Johnny-come-lately on the Mexican Border,

Eddie Howard gets a bullet-fire initiation!

by BARRY CORD

Whispering Joe kicked the door open and entered in a shooting rage

GUN for a TINHORN

BEING only twenty, Eddie Howard had not given much thought to death. Now, within the hour, he had to face it—the quick, clean crash of a bullet.

The echo of the slammed door lingered in the smoky atmosphere, lending a flat finality to the stunned scene. With some surprise Eddie noticed he still held the king of clubs in his right hand, ready to flip across the table to the man who had called him a cheat. His cheek stung where Joe Hooker's angry slap had brought blood in a red blotch against his smooth-shaven skin.

Now as he stared at Hooker's empty chair, the lantern-jawed man's whispering voice came back, like waves rebounding from the walls of the Imperial's back room.

"I'm going out to get a gun, tinhorn! Get yoreself heeled 'fore I come back. I'm comin' in shootin'!"

The words of themselves had had no meaning in those first moments. The whole thing had happened too quickly, and without reason. One minute he was dealing in a five-handed game of draw poker, laughing at Jack Stewart's quip. Then Hooker had slammed his cards down and accused him of trying to deal

off the bottom, and backed the accusation with a back-handed slap and a bitter, sneering ultimatum.

Eddie shook his head slightly, as if trying to clear it. He was a Johnny-come-lately to Nogales, on the Mexican Border—Nogales, where an itinerant peddler had pitched his camp and set up a store at the gateway to the Santa Cruz valley. Nogales had been nothing but a name to him less than two weeks before—a name and an assignment. Juarez had died, and it was rumored that Porfirio Diaz was in Nogales, ready to ride into Mexico and take over the government.

This was the reason for Eddie Howard's coming to this Border town—to cover Diaz's return to power in Mexico for the New York *Star*.

The door opened, and Eddie started, his fingers crumpling the card that was between them. The bald-headed bartender hesitated in the doorway.

"'Nother round?"

There were four of them at the poker table. There had been five with Joe Hooker—"Whispering Joe," as he was known locally.

It had begun with Eddie's meeting straw-haired, cynical Jack Stewart, who worked for the Nogales *Nugget*, in the lobby of the Imperial. They were both waiting for a news break from across the river. Stewart had suggested a game of poker in one of the back rooms. Somehow or other they had been joined by two others—Eddie had forgotten their names—and Whispering Joe.

HE HAD been in Nogales less than a week, but he had heard of Joe. Joe Hooker was the local bad man. A killer with a half-dozen notches on his gun handle. A braggart. A lantern-jawed man whose voice was a shock when first heard—a wheezy whisper at odds with the six-foot-plus bulk, the thick, hairy throat.

Joe had been boisterously half-drunk when he had joined them at the poker table. After the third round of drinks he had lapsed into a sullen silence that had finally exploded in angry accusation against Eddie.

The bartender cleared his throat and repeated his question.

It was the tall, gaunt man sitting across from Eddie who answered:

"Shore, Jake, another round."

Eddie shook his head. He felt ashamed of the fear that was choking him, making him unable to speak without a break in his voice.

The man smiled. He reached inside his gray suit coat and drew forth a long-barreled Colt .45. He swung the cylinder out, checked the five loads, clicked it back into place.

"It'll shoot where yuh point it, kid," he said. "Yuh're welcome to it."

He put it on the table so that the muzzle pointed at no one and carefully pushed it across to Eddie Howard.

Eddie looked down at the weapon, his face flushing. He had fired a pistol before. Target shooting. Thought it was fun, at the time. "Might come in handy," he had joked to his fellow workers on the *Star*. "Never can tell what a feller will run up against, out in the wild and woolly West."

The joke lacked savor now. He felt it plumb in the pit of his stomach, like indigestible lead. "Like lead," he thought. "Maybe that's where I'll get it—in the stomach!

He put his hand out to the Colt and lifted it. He was surprised at the weight of it. His hand shook a little.

"It ain't the man who shoots first," advised the owner of the gun. "It's the hombre who shoots straight that comes away from a gun fight. Remember that, kid."

Eddie nodded numbly. The gaunt man with the tawny hair and ragged mustache didn't look like he had ever been in a gunfight. A quiet, soft-spoken man. He had slumped in his chair all evening, drinking every round, losing a few dollars, and evidently enjoying himself.

Stewart had frozen up when Whispering Joe had heaved himself in half-drunken rage across the table and slapped Eddie's face. Now, as if shaking loose of his fear, he said:

"You can get out before he comes

back, Eddie. The back way."

Eddie turned his eyes to the gaunt man. He did it unconsciously, seeking advice from him. Eddie didn't know why, but he placed his confidence in this man.

"Yuh can do that." The man nodded. "But yuh'll have no rest in Nogales. Whisperin' Joe will go lookin' for yuh. Yuh're the kind he pushes, kid. He knows yuh're green. He's got yuh half-scared with his reputation."

Eddie nodded, still not trusting his tongue.

"Don't let reputations fool yuh," the gaunt man continued softly. "Some of 'em wouldn't stand a pin-prick."

Eddie choked back the lump in his throat. He looked around the small room, hazy with tobacco smoke. The door opened again and he jerked. He relaxed slowly as Jake brought the drinks on a tray and set them up.

The gaunt man took his drink without preamble. He brushed his mustache with the back of his hand and stood up. He was a tall, bony-framed man.

"Guess I'll step out for a while," he said. He looked down at Eddie. "Just remember what I said, kid. It's the man who takes his time and shoots straight who walks away."

After he had gone Eddie looked at his empty chair. Stewart was staring at him. The other man, whose name Eddie had forgotten—a slightly bald, nervous man who looked like a whisky drummer—took out a white linen handkerchief and wiped his brow.

Eddie pushed the heavy Colt to one side on the table. He gathered up the cards, shuffled. He was a wiry young man of medium height, a little swarthy of face, with slightly protruding upper teeth. He had bought a ten-gallon Stetson in Houston, as a token to his coming to Nogales. Otherwise his dress was a conservative dark gray.

"Only three of us now," he said. He was surprised at how steady his voice was. "What say to a little game of stud?"

THE gaunt man came back about fifteen minutes later. He was smoking a cigar, one of those Mexican cheroots with a corkscrew twist to it. He walked to his chair, but did not sit down.

"Met Joe at the bar," he said. He smiled at Eddie and let his glance take in Stewart and the sweating whisky salesman. "Might be a good idea if we stepped back out of the way," he suggested. "Joe's on his way here now."

Stewart dropped his cards. The nervous salesman scraped his chair back and bumped against the table in his hurry to get away.

"Eddie—" Stewart said, then he stopped and smiled in a sickly way.

He wanted to tell Eddie all this was his fault. He had suggested the game in the first place, and he had not objected when Whispering Joe had horned in. He wanted to say something, but the silence was too heavy in the room, and he could not meet Eddie's eyes.

He got up and moved away.

They all heard Joe's boots outside the door, the heavy tread of a heavy man who walks flatfooted.

Eddie shot a look at the gaunt man. The man smiled and nodded.

"Shoot straight," Eddie thought. "Take it easy—and shoot straight. One shot's enough."

Whispering Joe turned the knob and kicked the door open. He came into the room cursing—and shooting. He was like a wild man, a man committed to this thing and afraid of it.

He fired four shots in less than that many seconds. None of them even brushed Eddie.

Joe was a big target in the doorway. Eddie didn't even get up out of his chair. He got his fingers around the Colt and tilted it up as Whispering Joe fired his first wild shot. He steadied his arm on the table.

He fired one shot. . . .

Someone dragged the pseudo bad-man's body out of the doorway, to some spot to await the undertaker. Eddie sat at the table, watching the smoke drift slowly out of the room. He had no feeling. It would come later; regret, remorse, excitement—a mixture of emotions to shake him. But now he sat there, a wiry, buck-toothed youngster who had killed a man.

The gaunt man who had loaned him

his Colt came up to the table.

"Nice shootin'," he said.

Eddie held out the Colt. "Thanks."

His mouth was dry and the word sort of stuck in his throat. He looked across the room to the staring faces in the doorway.

"Wonder what made him come in like that?" he asked wonderingly. "He was like a wild man."

The gaunt man shrugged. "Guess he believed what I told him, at the bar."

Eddie looked up. "Told him?"

"Yeah. I told him you were Billy the Kid. Joe never saw the real Kid. From the loose descriptions that float along the Border you could have been Billy." He smiled. "I thought telling him that would stop him, but I reckon he felt he had his reputation as a badman at stake."

Eddie got to his feet. The gaunt man slipped his Colt out of sight inside his coat and was turning away.

"Wait," Eddie said. The man turned and Eddie said, "What did you say your name was? I owe you my life, you know."

"Earp," the gaunt man said, smiling a little. "Wyatt Earp."

The Luck of Kit Carson

By SIMPSON M. RITTER

WHEN at fifteen the later famous Kit Carson ran away to join the "mountain boys," his uncle, a saddle maker to whom Kit had been apprenticed, advertised for the "runaway bound boy." He offered a reward of one cent for Kit's return to show how little he thought of his loss.

It is said of Carson that he grew so well versed in forest lore that like the best Indian woodsmen, from a moccasin print he could distinguish an Indian's tribe, age, sex, height, and weight; and that he could recognize the hoofmarks of the horses of most Indian fighters and guides, badmen, mountainmen, and even Indian leaders.

Kit Carson, who soon became one of America's living legends, was also one of America's luckiest men.

In battle, an Apache bullet passed through his thick hair; a white renegade shot a rifle at him from such close range that the powder burned the Indian-fighter's face, but inflicted no other harm, and he once dashed thru a hail of arrows and rifle slugs thrown at him by fifty ambushing Comanches. Wounded by Blackfeet, he escaped his pursuers and spent a night sleeping in the snow, which helped stop the bleeding of a bad wound.

When his reputation was established, fifty generally savage Utes retreated rather than fight it out with Kit Carson though he had but one companion with him at the time. On another occasion 200 Blackfeet refused to give battle to Kit and his small band of Carson men.

Kit used to drive brass tacks, it is said, into the stock of his rifle for each man he killed face to face. After about the eighteenth tack, Kit, always lazy in anything but fighting, hunting, stopped counting. Perhaps from this grew the Western custom of notching a gun or otherwise indicating one's kills!

THE TANTRUMS of MR. ALLISON

"I use a brace of double-barreled sawed-offs." I tell 'em

When a gunman gets proddy, Sheriff Bat Masterson cuts some red tape with a Winchester!

IT WAS past midnight at the old *Morning Telegraph* and we reporters had gathered around the big racing table to hear Bat Masterson tell one of his anecdotes of the Old West.

But tonight Mr. Masterson seemed rather distrait. The famed sheriff of Dodge City sat for several moments in silence, his round, smooth-shaven face thoughtful. Finally he pushed back his black fedora, removed the cigar from his lips, and smiled.

"Excuse me, boys," he said. "I was just thinkin' about Ransford Cooke, an Eastern tenderfoot I used to know. This is back in the early days of Dodge, right after I've quit huntin' buffalo for Billy Dixon and am temporarily holdin' down the job of marshal, while Jack Bridges is home in Missouri, visitin' his ailin' mother. This Eastern gent—I reckon I saved his skin. And it came near

A True Story by SAM GARDENHIRE

bein' the worst mistake I ever made in my life."

Masterson paused, as if expecting a comment. So I made one.

"Saving a man's life, Bat," I observed. "That's a meritorious deed, isn't it?"

The noted frontier sheriff shook his head. "Not always, Gardenhire. Take Kaiser Bill Hohenzollern, for instance. Could savin' his life be classed as a meritorious deed?"

I subsided into embarrassed silence, while Mr. Masterson continued:

Derby-Wearing Tenderfoot

When I first meet the Eastern shorthorn, Ransford Cooke—Bat Masterson related—I'm standin' in front of the Aces-Up gamblin' house, on Front Street. The Dodge cattle boom is just beginnin'. Big herds of longhorns are constantly arrivin' from Texas, and every night the streets are thronged with drunken men—riffraff and Texas trail crews, their pockets lined with many months' pay, all of 'em packin' six-guns and all just honin' to use 'em. At that time Dodge City is known as the toughest town on the Border. Three or four men are gettin' shot every night.

This Cooke gent steps out of the crowd and speaks to me.

"You're Marshal Masterson?" he asks.

I nod. I could have spotted him a mile away for an Easterner by his duds. He's wearin' a light checked suit, tan shoes with gray spats, and a white linen shirt with a hard collar. Sure, he's young, but he's sportin' sideburns and a dinky mustache.

What rivets my attention is his hat. Though his clothes is immaculate, he's wearin' the most disreputable green derby I ever lays eyes on. It looks as if some feller has gone after it, plumb ferocious, with a pitchfork.

"Mr. Masterson," he says in tremblin' tones, "my name is Ransford Cooke, and I appeal to you for protection. I arrived here early this mornin' on the Santa Fe from Boston and I've been attacked at least a dozen times. Cowboy ruffians keep snatchin' off my hat and usin' it for a target!"

I take another look at that ragged derby and have a hard time tryin' not to laugh.

"Pilgrim," I say, "your derby hat is a challenge and a temptation to every Western gent. The only advice I can offer is for you to buy yourself a cowboy sombrero. Then you won't be so noticeable."

"Thank you," he answers. "For some reason I do seem to attract attention. Tomorrow I'm leavin' for Hays City on business, but before I go I shall adopt full Western garb. Another thing: I notice that all the men out here are armed. What make of pistol would you advise me to purchase for self-protection?"

I scrutinizes him. "Are you familiar with fire-arms?" I ask.

"No," he says. His voice quavers. I can see he's scared to death. I begin to feel sorry for him.

"Listen, friend," I say. "If you want to be safe in a Western town, never pack a gun!"

He stares at me in surprise. "But if I'm attacked, how am I to defend myself?"

"That's just the point," I answered. "You won't be attacked. If you remember to tell everybody everywhere that you don't own a gun and never carry one under any circumstaces, you'll be safer here than you ever were in Boston."

"How can that be?" he exclaims, in astonishment.

"In the West," I go on, "we have what we call the Even Break. It means that any man can shoot down another man, providin' they're both armed and, unless flagrant circumstances prove otherwise, it's presumed the killin' was done in self-defense."

Here I wag my finger at him in emphasis. "But if the victim ain't armed, that changes it into murder, and murder is a hangin' offense. Out here we have no long trials, no protracted delays. Hardly has the gunsmoke cleared away before the guilty miscreant is danglin' from a telegraph pole. No thoughtful Western sport is goin' to take a chance

on that, and no gunfightin' outlaw would risk what he fears even more than the noose—the stigma of cowardice for downin' an unarmed man."

Ransford Cooke's weasel face lights up. "Thanks. You've made it quite plain."

Gunfighter's Outfit

He walks away grinnin', and even then I don't realize what a blunder I've made in tellin' him that. When next I hear of him, he's wearin' a cowboy outfit and is struttin' around town, as proud as a tom turkey.

Then for the time bein', under the press of more important affairs, I forget about Ransford Cooke. News has just been brought to me that Clay Allison's trail herd has finally arrived from Texas, and is camped on the south bank of the Arkansas, about ten miles away from Dodge.

I've been hearin' a lot about that drive crew. Almost every rider who's passed the herd along the trail, has brought me tales about what they're threatenin' to do to Dodge when they hit town.

Clay Allison himself is ramroddin' the outfit and he's bringin' his bunch of Texas gunfighters. They're in the habit of turnin' towns inside out for relaxation every time they ride into one. I'm commencin' to feel a little nervous. It won't do for me to let anything happen while Jack Bridges is away.

So I decide to pay 'em a visit. I forks my pony, crosses over at the ford, and rides out to their camp. There I draws rein and looks around.

It's a right big outfit. There are three or four thousand cattle grazin' out there on the range, three canvas-covered wagons, ragged and weather-stained after the long trip north, two campfires and a brace of cooks.

I steps out of stirrups and I ain't hardly touched the ground before a band of a dozen horsemen ride up, to look at my marshal's star and ask me my business. I picks out Clay Allison at once. Even in a crowd, he's a right easy man to see—outstandin', in fact,—for he's club-footed!

His saddle is equipped with stirrups which are especially made to accommodate that type of physical deformity.

BAT MASTERSON
One of the most renowned of Western pioneers and lawmen, he spent the declining years of his life as a sports writer for the New York Morning Telegraph. It was in the office of that newspaper that he told the startling, exciting tales of his career which are recounted in this series of stories written by Sam Gardenhire, who was one of his fascinated listeners!

Weazened Little—Devil

He looks more like a parson than he does like a cattleman, with his black sombrero, long frock coat, and his black trousers tucked into knee-high black boots. Though the tails of his coat cover up any sign of weapons, he has the look and manner of a gunfighter, and I begin to credit the tales I've heard about him killin' five or six men.

He's a weazened little feller with a lean, hawk face bronzed deep by the Texas sun.

Also, one glance at the gents who are with him tells me they spend a heap more time fingerin' the hammers of their Colts than they ever do fingerin' the nooses of their throw-ropes.

As requested, I tell 'em why I'm there. I mention the threats I've heard and give 'em an outline of the law rules prevailin' in Dodge. But I ain't got far before I hear 'em snickerin' and see 'em nudgin' one another. That puts me into a slow burn, and right away I turns plumb grim and forbiddin' as I finish what I'm sayin'.

Clay Allison grins. He says: "It just happens I've got to go to Hays City to see a man about winter grazin' privileges. It'll take me nigh onto a week. At the end of that time, me and the boys'll drop into Dodge and see what you've got."

I nod and climb back onto my pony. Then I say:

"We've got plenty of things in Dodge. For instance, if any roisterin' starts, the even break is suspended. If the odds are too heavy, I get 'em any way that suits me best—from ambush, if necessary. I use a brace of double-barreled sawed-offs, each of the four cartridges loaded with four buckshot apiece!"

I tighten rein and ride away. But they ain't snickerin' any longer. They're plumb serious.

Easterner in a Panic

Yet when I get back to Dodge, I'm still worried. Any one of those gunmen in Clay Allison's camp is enough to whiten a city marshal's hair, let alone thirteen of 'em! If that Allison gang rides in and stands Dodge on its head, it'll ruin me. I might as well pack up and leave Kansas for good. Nothin' like that ever happened while Jack Bridges was in charge. The town council would have my star in jig time.

The only ray of light I can see is that I've got a full week to prepare—so I think! But again I'm barkin' up the wrong tree.

Four days later I'm standin' in front of the Alhambra, when a feller in cowboy duds plucks at my sleeve. I recognize him. It's Ransford Cooke.

This time he ain't just scared—he's panic-stricken. His face is green, sweat is rollin' down his face, and when he tries to speak, he stutters. Finally he manages to tell his story.

It seems, while he's up at Hays City, standin' in a bar with a couple of fellers celebratin' his successful business deal, he gets in a fight. There's a little feller who keeps pluckin' at his sleeve from behind, tryin' to borrow a match. Cooke tells him he hasn't got a match, but the little runt persists.

He looks harmless enough and Cooke takes him for a preacher. Finally Cooke loses his temper. He gives the runt a shove that knocks him flat.

"You club-footed little pest, quit botherin' me!" Cooke roars.

I interrupt the tenderfoot. "Wait a minute, Cooke! This gent you buffaloes—he's club-footed and wearin' a frock coat?"

"Yes," says Cooke.

The man he's knocked down is Clay Allison!

I stares at him dumbfounded while he finishes his story. The little feller jumps up, he says, yanks out two enormous six-shooters and shoves the muzzles into Cooke's middle. Before he has a chance to shoot, however, Cooke screeches out that he's unarmed. So Allison gives him ten minutes to go and get himself heeled. Then Cooke explains that the only gun he owns is packed away in his bag in his room back of Hanerhan's Saloon at Dodge City.

Somehow, after an argument, he manages to persuade Allison into postponin' hostilities, and promises to meet him in a showdown fight at sundown today in front of the Alamo Saloon. Of course his story about ownin' a gun is a lie, but Cooke is past carin'. All he wants to do is to get back to Dodge and put himself under my protection.

"Save me!" he babbles. "Hide me! Get me out of this terrible place!"

Stirrin' a Hornet's Nest with a Stick

For a moment I'm so exasperated I'm tempted to snatch out my Colt and bend its barrel into a U over the top of his foolish skull. But that won't mend matters. The damage is done. Then I notices he's carryin' his bag, all packed and ready. I think fast. He'll never have the nerve to stand up against Clay

Allison with a six-gun. For him to try it would be a useless sacrifice.

I look at my watch. There ain't much time. I grab Cooke by the arm, rush him down to the Sante Fe depot and shove him onto the last car, just as the train is pullin' out for the East.

Then I walk back along Front Street, more worried than ever. The situation was bad enough before but this is bound to make it heaps worse. Clay Allison is a high-spirited gent and I can guess how his temper will flare up when he learns that Marshal Masterson has smuggled Ransford Cooke out from his clutches. As for those other Texas gunmen, it'll be like stirrin' up a hornet's nest with a stick!

I go to the Alamo and wait for Clay Allison until sundown, but he doesn't show, though I hear rumors that he's in town, very drunk. About nine o'clock I get tired of waitin'. So I walk over to my room, which is on the second floor of the Dodge House, in front, and turn in for the night. I'm hopin' Clay Allison is so drunk that he's forgot completely what happened in Hays City.

But I'm wrong. Early the next mornin' Phil Beatty comes bustin' into my room, wildly excited.

"Quick, Bat!" he yells. "Clay Allison is in town with a dozen tough vinegaroons. They're frothin' mad and painted for war, and there'll be plenty of trouble in Dodge if they ever bust loose! Hop to the winder, prompt, and you can knock a couple of 'em out of saddle as they ride by!"

I jumps out of bed, whips on my trousers, grabs a couple of loaded Colt pistols and lay 'em on the window sill. Next I snatch up my Winchester and lever a cartridge into the firin' chamber.

Double-Barreled Persuader

I'm just in time. Theres' a clatter of hoofs in the street below and, over the top of the wooden awning outside I see a bunch of horsemen ride into my view. It's Clay Allison and his bunch of gunfighters. Allison is mounted on a skittery paint horse. They draw rein in front of Hanerhan's Saloon, right opposite, and wheel around facin' the drinkin' place, with their backs to me, Clay out in front and the rest formin' a line behind him.

As for me, I can't cut loose with the Winchester yet because none of them are flashin' their guns. So I wait.

Clay is stripped for action. He ain't wearin' his long frock coat any more—just his blue shirt and black trousers and cowboy boots. His holsters are tied down to his thighs and in them I can see a brace of bone-handled six-shooters. Gone, too, is his black sombrero. His head is bare and his long iron-gray hair is tossin' in the mornin' breeze like the mane of an angry lion.

"Whar's that low-down coyote, Ransford Cooke!" he roars suddenly. "Trot him out, Hanerhan. I'm here to drink his gore!"

He waits for a moment, but there ain't a sign of life in Hanerhan's Saloon. The front door is open, but the big window is dark. After a pause, Allison lets out another bellow.

"I'm worse'n a curly wolf. I was raised on slaughter and weaned on blood! I'm a cross between a sidewindin' rattler and a hydrophoby skunk, and I'm so mean and onery, I spit poison and breathe out sudden death. I can outfight a hungry catamount, outgame a grizzly bear, and rip off the bark twenty feet high whenever I sharpen my claws! I was sired by a thunderbolt, raised by a cyclone, and I cut my teeth on the crest of a ragin' torrent. I can whip my weight in wildcats, live on fire-'n'-brimstone, and conquer a nest of rattlers, givin' 'em bite for bite!"

Suddenly he yanks out both guns and waves 'em in the air.

"Ransford Cooke!" he screams. "Whar is he? Do I got to go in thar after him?"

Up in my room, I lift the Winchester and draw bead on his back, right between the shoulder blades. It goes against my grain to shoot down a man from behind like this, but he's had fair warnin' and he knows the penalty.

Deadly Insult

But he don't start shootin'. He just sits there, starin' at the front of Haner-

han's Saloon like a man in a daze. After a moment he lets his Colts sag down and shoves 'em back in the holsters. Finally he turns in saddle and says somethin' to the man behind him, in low tones. They object pretty strenuously but he insists, so at last they wheel their ponies and ride on down Front Street, leavin' Clay all alone.

Then he gets painfully out of saddle and hobbles up to the front door of Hanerhan's Saloon.

"Whar's everybody?" he asks. "Is this here town plumb deserted?"

His manner is so plaintive that Jack Hanerhan summons enough courage to stick his head out of the door.

"What's the trouble, stranger?" Jack asks. "What for is all this pawin' up the sod?"

"I've been insulted, that's what," Clay Allison complains. "I want to see Bat Masterson. I want to tell him about that polecat, Ransford Cooke."

As for me, up in my room, I'm nonplused. I can't understand why this Texas fire-eater has become so peaceful, all of a sudden. I'm plumb disgusted with him, too. But from all appearances, the trouble is over, so I dress fast and buckle on a six-shooter.

A couple of minutes later I'm crossin' Front Street to Hanerhan's Saloon.

I find Allison in the barroom talkin' to Hanerhan.

"Howdy, Clay," I say. "What's put you-all on the prod?"

In grieved tones Allison tells me how he's been insulted by Ransford Cooke in Hays City, and then how Cooke has dodged out of duelin' him in front of the Alamo.

"If you meet up with this feller, Cooke, what are you goin' to do?"

"Do?" Allison's eyes are blazin' and he's lookin' wild. "I'm goin' to change him into a colander. I'll fill him so full of bullet holes you could use him to strain soup!"

I rub my chin. "You can't do it, Clay," I say. "Because he ain't here."

Then I tell about puttin' Cooke on the train and shippin' him back East. As I'm talkin' I'm keepin' my hand, careless like, near the butt of my gun.

"So if you want to skin him like a cat, Clay," I finish, "I reckon you'll have to do it in Boston."

Square-Dealing Lawman

But Allison ain't offended. His whole face lights up with joy.

"Why, doggone my spurs!" he shouts. "You mean you run him out of town for what he done to me?"

My rule is to be diplomatic, whenever it'll work. If Clay Allison wants to view it that way, I've no objection.

"You might call it that," I answer.

Allison lets out a whoop of delight.

"Now that's what I call square dealin'!" he thunders. He turns to the other men who've wandered into the barroom while we've been talkin'. "Step up, gents. The drinks is on me!"

When I leave Hanerhan's an hour later, I have Allison's promise I won't have any trouble with his outfit. He keeps his word. Two days later, when they leaves, they're still as peaceful as lambs.

But a week later, when I drops into Hanerhan's, I'm still puzzlin' over Clay Allison.

At last Jack asks: "What's the matter, Bat? Why so gloomy? You ain't in trouble, are you?"

"Clay Allison has got me stumped," I answer. "He don't strike me as a coward. I'm still wonderin' why he pulls in his horns, that mornin'."

Hanerhan laughs. "There's no mystery about it," he says. "After you left he told me what happened. While he was sittin' outside this place on his hoss —just as he drew his guns—he caught sight of you up in the Dodge House, drawin' down on him with a Winchester. You see the dark front winder of this place acted just like a mirror!"

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NEXT ISSUE

THE MEDICAL KID

An Exciting Novelet by STEUART EMERY

RESCUE PARTY

by SAMUEL MINES

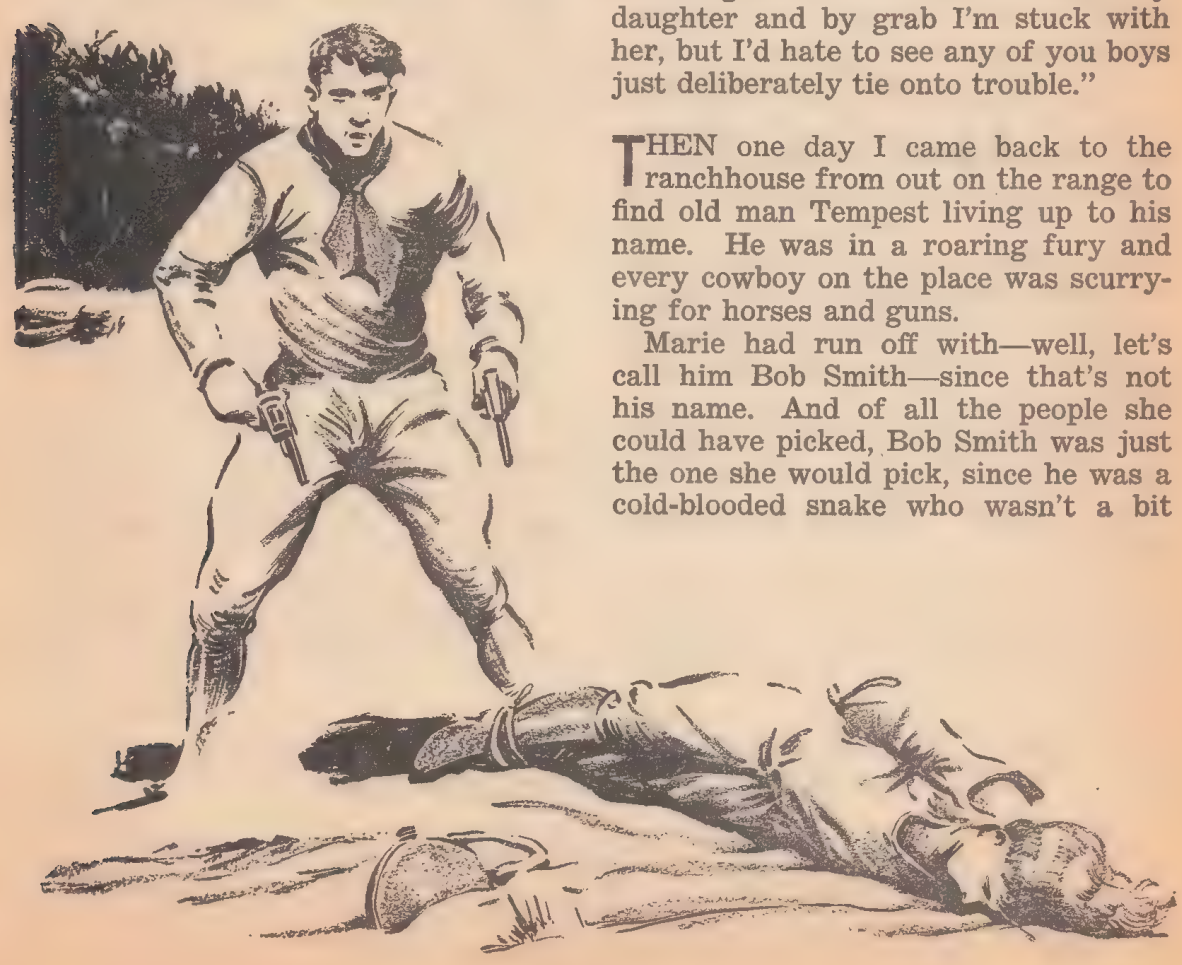
Here's why Flip Krugar can't look a tomato in the face!

WHEN the stewed tomatoes were passed, Flip Krugar excused himself and left the table. I found him sitting outside on a bench and staring moodily out at the varicolored buttes which formed the horizon.

"I never did care much for tomatoes," he offered by way of explaining his sudden exit, "and ever since a certain rescue mission to which I was a party, I ain't been able to look a tomato in the face."

I was foreman on old man Tempest's T T Ranch, Flip Krugar said, and like every unattached cowboy in the country, a little foolish over the old man's yella-headed daughter Marie. She was flightier than a flock of ducks, but none of us could see it at the time, even though the old man warned us.

"I pity the man who marries that flibbertigibbet!" he'd roar. "She's my daughter and by grab I'm stuck with her, but I'd hate to see any of you boys just deliberately tie onto trouble."



THEN one day I came back to the ranchhouse from out on the range to find old man Tempest living up to his name. He was in a roaring fury and every cowboy on the place was scurrying for horses and guns.

Marie had run off with—well, let's call him Bob Smith—since that's not his name. And of all the people she could have picked, Bob Smith was just the one she would pick, since he was a cold-blooded snake who wasn't a bit

interested in her, but only in what money he could get out of her old man.

We all knew him and there wasn't no mistake about it. Tempest knew too.

"I'll give five hundred dollars to the man who brings me back that snake's scalp!" he bellowed. "And my daughter," he added, kind of an afterthought.

The men took out in groups and singly. I changed horses and went too. The gal had left a note saying she and Smith were running off to get married.

That meant they should head for the county seat. So I didn't go that way. I struck out into the desert.

Some time after noon, I hit their tracks. They were traveling fast. I chased them for two days, running out of water and getting plumb dry and nervous. I could tell from the signs that there was trouble brewing too. Marie wouldn't care for this a little bit and Smith would be driving her, knowing what would happen to him if they were caught.

I OVERTOOK them the evening of the third day. They'd made camp in a little hollow of some rocks and sand dunes. With dark I took off my boots and sneaked down, a pistol in each hand.

Like I thought, Marie had tired of her bargain and probably tried to make a getaway, for that coyote had tied her hand and foot so's he could get some rest.

I snuk up on them, found her tied and him sleeping. He woke up as I bent over the girl to untie her.

"Rest easy," I said to him. "We're goin' back."

He knew what that meant, so he tried a shot at me through his tarp, having his six-gun handy under there. That's bad shooting and of course he missed. I didn't. Which solved the problem of packing him back.

The first thing I did after untying the gal was to go for a drink of water out of her canteen whilst she got over her hysterics. The canteen was dryer than my mouth. I rummaged around through the packs while she wept.

"Where's the water?" I asked her.

"I f-forgot to f-fill the c-canteens," she sobbed. "B-bob was so angry at m-me. He st-struck me!"

I'd have been tempted to strike her myself. "What have you been living on these three days?" I asked.

SHE pointed a trembling finger at the packs. "There's two dozen cans of tomatoes in th-there! B-bob told me to get some canned g-goods and I th-thought they were beans and stuff, but they're all tomatoes!"

With which she dissolves into tears again. I couldn't blame her, three days on tomatoes.

Well, it took us three more days to get back. During which time we drank, ate and practically washed in tomatoes.

I hadn't been exactly fond of the fruit to begin with, but by the time we shook the desert dust off our boots and got onto T T grass again I was ready to reach for a gun if anybody even mentioned the tomatoes again.

And even the five hundred bucks old man Tempest paid me couldn't take the taste out of my mouth. I quit my job and I never see him or the gal again.

Flip Krugar shook his head, gazing sadly out at the clear line where sky met prairie.

"Yessir," he said, "that experience did two things for me. I'm a bachelor and I never eat tomatoes."

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COW-COUNTRY QUIZ

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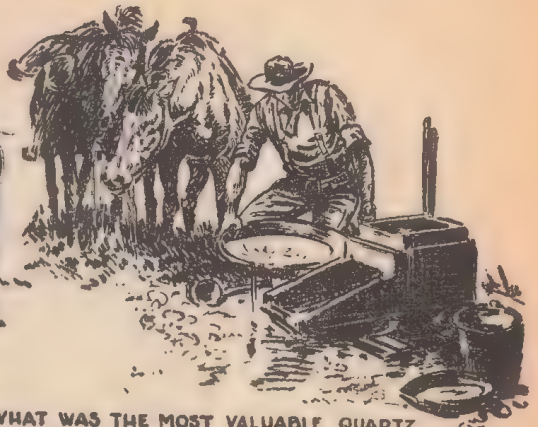


② WHAT WAS THE MOST VALUABLE QUARTZ NUGGET FOUND DURING THE CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH?

③ HOW MANY MEN DID WILD BILL HICKOK KILL IN THE FAMOUS McCANLES FIGHT?

④ DOES A BULLWHIP DIFFER FROM ANY OTHER WHIP?

⑤ WHAT IS THE DRAGOON COLT?

The answers are on Page 161—if you MUST look!

THE

A NOVELET BY TOM W. BLACKBURN

I

THE Rattlesnake Range lay in the foreground, to the northwest. Westward, beyond this gray foothill upheaval, towered the blue shadows of the Wind River Mountain. Between blue hills and the camp rolled the wide, shallow course of the Sweetwater Valley. Green River was a short week ahead; the Missouri River towns were six weeks behind. This was near the end of the trace.

Mike Menafee, brigade captain and partisan for the independent Rocky Mountain Fur Company, watched a mounted party fording the river below his camp. Max Tugend, his lieutenant, who knew the flat-country creeks but never before had been into the mountains, seemed uneasy.

"Trouble, Mike?" he asked.

Menafee shook his head. "No. That's a Crow party. Crows are always friendly to a buckskin outfit. And see that white in the lead? That's Jim Beckwourth, a mountain man from the beginnin'. I heard the Crows had adopted him as a

FUR TRAPPERS

Leading a brigade with supplies to a rendezvous with Jim Bridger, mountain man Mike Menafee is plunged into struggle against powerful interests!

As the man whipped around, Menafee's gun spewed out a gout of smoke

sub-chief. It's a long time since I've seen Jim. We'll have us a big feed tonight, and talk. Tell the boys to ease off. It's all right."

"We're pretty close to a couple of American Fur Company posts," Tugend murmured. "Remember that Bill Sublette warned us, when we left the river, that Mr. Astor's men would stop us before we reached the Green and made rendezvous with Fitzpatrick and Bridger—if they could. This might be an Astor trick."

"With Beckwourth bossing it?" Mike laughed. "Shucks! Jim was out here with me and the rest of the old bunch on Ashley's first trip. And the old brigade has always stuck together. He wouldn't have anything to do with the Big Company."

"Kenneth McKenzie was one of the first up the river, too," Tugend protested. "But he signed on quick enough with American when they gave him a partnership and made him King of the Missouri."

"McKenzie wasn't an Ashley man," Menafee said. "He showed up too late for that. Tell the boys to put away their guns and chuck some more meat on over the fires."

Tugend moved off to relay orders. Menafee walked a little way out from the camp toward the new arrivals. Eagerness was in him. This had been a difficult crossing in many ways. Pulling strings in his New York office, John Jacob Astor had quietly been creating a huge monopoly stretching from St. Louis to the headwaters of the Columbia.

By swallowing the connections he wanted, offering small partnerships and taking them into his American Fur Company, Astor had seized control of both sources of supply and outlets for fur in the trade. The men in the hills were being driven into contracts with the Big Company in order to exist, and even the best fur men could not take enough plew—beaver skins—in a season to lift themselves out of their initial debt to the company under the terms of Astor's contracts.

GENERAL ASHLEY'S retirement from the trade had left the independents with no organization of their own. The Sublette brothers and Bob Campbell on the river, and Tom Fitzpatrick and Jim Bridger and a few others in the mountains, had united in self-defense. Under the name of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, they had bought the remnants of Ashley's organization in an attempt to guarantee themselves a source of supply, and a fur outlet in competition to the Big Company.

Menafee's brigade was a supply train, carrying goods for Rocky Mountain's use at the summer trade rendezvous, and the success or failure of the independent effort might well depend on Menafee's arrival in time for trading. A heavy responsibility. Coupled with it was the knowledge that American would hamper him in every way, a thing which he had felt even before he left the river, for American had tied up nearly every reliable trail man in the river towns. Menafee had been forced to take what he could get in making up his crew—unreliable drifters and inexperienced greenhorns.

The past six weeks had been a difficult haul, expecting trouble daily. And the fact that none had as yet appeared made it even more difficult. He knew he would have no warning when American did strike at him.

It was good to meet an old comrade like Beckwourth. There would be talk, news of other old friends, news of the country. Jim would know if an American party in any force was in the vicinity. And maybe he could be persuaded to join his Indians with the brigade until it had crossed South Pass. Menafee hoped so. Once over this barrier, he thought he would be secure from Big Company molestation.

The leader of the Crow party rode up from the river at a slow jog, directly toward Menafee. The Indians, however, split off on either side of him, one party riding in one direction, the other in another, at a hard, driving lope. The two lines circled the little camp, the riders shouting savagely, waving their lances, guns, and bows with aggressive fierceness. It was spectacular.

Menafee glanced back at his men. They were grouped tightly about Max Tugend, attempting to appear wholly at ease, but obviously disturbed. Menafee grinned without humor. This, as much as anything, proved their incompetence in the high country. Hostility from mountain Indians did not come with this kind of advance fanfare. It came suddenly, usually without warning, like the sudden, hissing flight of an arrow from nowhere.

Beckwourth was close. Menafee threw up one hand.

"Jim!" he shouted. "Yuh old mosshorn, pull up and light down! There's meat on the fire."

The man in buckskin grinned, pulled his horse into a rearing halt, and slid expertly to the ground over the animal's rump. He shoved a lean, powerful hand at Mike.

"You been movin', boy!" he said. "Didn't know whether I was goin' to cut yore sign or not." His eyes studied Mike. He chuckled. "Just a thin kid when we was out here with Ashley. And now all whang-leather and haunch. Yuh do good, Mike."

Menafee could see no change in Beckwourth. The years had not altered the predatory set of the head, the aquiline features, the mocking humor in the jet-black eyes.

The two of them walked back into the camp. The Crows, their demonstration finished, bunched, dismounted, and came in also. Scattering with the bold, sharp curiosity of their kind, they moved among Menafee's men, eyeing individuals and equipment appraisingly. Beckwourth did likewise, without seeming to. After a moment he nodded toward Tugend and the others.

"Brigades aren't what they used to be in the old days, eh, Mike? Think this bunch of white-livers of yores can handle a trade with these Crows?"

"They might, Jim," Menafee answered, "but they're not goin' to. This is a Rocky Mountain consignment of goods, due at the Green River rendezvous. We're not opening any packs here."

Beckwourth's brows rose mockingly.

"Ever try to keep from tradin' with a bunch of Indians that had trade on their minds, Mike?" he asked innocently.

"I'm in no mood for hoorawin', Jim!" Menafee snapped. "You know independent trade at the rendezvous is killed if I don't get these goods in. I'm ringy enough about it. Those Indians didn't come to trade. There ain't a pack of fur among them. And if they had, you'd turn 'em off."

"Boy, how tall a notch yuh think I can carve? When an Indian gets set on somethin', he's set on it. Yuh better break open yore packs. I hate to see Jim Bridger and Broken Hand and the rest at the rendezvous with no goods, but I'd hate to see you and yore greenhorns roughed, worse. There'll be plenty of Big Company goods on the Green for them that have got plew to trade with. No need of you haulin' this stuff that far."

"You're cleanin' me out?" Menafee asked raggedly. "That's what you came in here for?"

"Pains me like all get-out, boy," Beckwourth agreed, "but I got my orders."

"Orders?"

"Shore. American has set up a temporary post on the Poposia. The factor there drives a man hard. American don't want any independent goods crossin' South Pass and what American don't want, I don't either. I got me a little pardnership and a chance at a stake out of 'em. That's more than any of us will get on the other side of the mountains, Mike. The old days are done, and it's time we all admitted it. I don't want to see Old Gabe or Tom Fitzpatrick or any of the old brigade hurt. I don't want you hurt. We've all been friends. That's why I'm tellin' yuh to break open yore packs."

MENAFEE glanced once again at his camp. The Crows had quietly placed themselves so that his men were cut off from their weapons, and a silent Indian was near each man. The net was too tight. He swung back to Beckwourth.

"If the Big Company goes this far, the rest of us will have to sharpen our sticks, too, Jim," he said quietly. "If yuh get anything from me, yuh'll have to take it."

"Nothin' personal, Mike," Beckwourth said, with sudden earnestness. "Just hoss sense and business. Yuh got to understand that. We'll all do better workin' for American and you got to be persuaded, same as I was. Tell Bridger and Broken Hand Jim that Beckwourth says the old days are gone. They'll pay attention to my judgment. They'll know it's honest. They'll understand."

"Shore," Mike agreed grimly. "I understand, too, Jim. But they'll figger yuh're wrong, same as I do, and we'll try to prove it."

Beckwourth nodded. "I reckon yuh'd have to," he admitted.

There was no signal that Menafee could identify, but suddenly the Crows moved in unison. One of the brigade men yelped in protest at the swift hands which disarmed him, and he was clubbed senseless for his outcry. The others, sensing their helplessness, patterned themselves on their captain, remaining motionless and silent. The Crows swiftly stripped the camp. As they remounted with their plunder, Beckwourth clucked with mocking amazement:

"Ain't they the cussedest thieves?"

Max Tugend, angry and alarmed, moved up to watch Beckwourth's Crows recross the Sweetwater.

"The mountain country, huh!" he spat. "The old brigade men who stick together! Ashley's brotherhood—well, there they are, Menafee. One of the best of 'em, cleanin' out packs that belong to the best friends he ever had—and usin' a pack of stinkin' Indians from a tribe supposed to be friends to the trade to do it with. Back-knifin'! I can't get back to the flat country where a man can count on his friends fast enough!"

Menafee shook his head.

"We started for the Green River, Max," he said quietly. "We're goin' to show up there. And with full packs too. Beckwourth didn't put a knife in our ribs. It would have been easier for him to let his Crows jump us on the march and leave none of us breathin' enough to curse him when he was through, but he came in to argue for what he wanted. He actually believes the best thing for the trade is to let the Big Company control it. He thinks tryin' to operate Rocky Mountain in competition to American is just makin' unnecessary trouble for everybody. So we've not only got to haul goods we haven't got over South Pass, but we've got to persuade Jim he's plumb wrong."

Tugend snorted. "The minute we hit the foothills I was on strange grass, and I know it, Mike. But I'm no fool. Yuh're tryin' to tell me that we've got a private little war to fight, but that the enemy ain't really an enemy. He's a friend. And yuh're talkin' about goods goin' over South Pass when the closest place we could make up new packs is in St. Louis. It don't make sense. We're whipped. Let's admit it and head back for the river. Right now ain't too soon for me and the rest of the boys."

"Max," Menafee said, with a slow grin, "before you and the rest of the boys see the river again, yuh're goin' to know an awful lot more about the mountains and mountain men than yuh do now. Tell the boys to break camp."

II

BECKWOURTH'S Indians apparently had been well-rehearsed before hand. Riding stock had not been touched. Ample food supplies had been left in the camp to carry Menafee's party back to the Missouri outfitting towns. And there was even one pack of trade goods remaining, sufficient for bribes and presents to any other Indians likely to be encountered along the return trail.

Tugend and the others growled bitterly at these gestures of thoughtfulness, but Mike knew they were impressed. This was the first proof he could show them of the motives behind Beckwourth's visit. The first proof that this was a business, and not a personal war.

With his party under way, Mike led them on up the course of the Sweetwater a few miles, then cut suddenly north into a tumbled country of ravines and slanting rock outcroppings. He was well aware of the surliness in the men behind him and the dangers which lay in it, and he said nothing of the plan shaping in his mind.

If Tugend and the others understood now what he intended, they might mutiny and turn back on their own for the Missouri. Or they might measure chances and force him to head directly on over South Pass toward the coming rendezvous on the Green, empty-handed. And there was always the possibility they might, on consideration, swing to acceptance of Beckwourth's argument and desert him, Menafee, to join American Fur Company forces wherever they might find them.

Back in the slantrock, Menafee halted the company in a ravine invisible from neighboring high country. He ordered only tinder-dry wood collected for fires and these used only for cooking.

It was necessary, before he could do anything else, for him to disappear. It was foolish to think that Beckwourth wouldn't send scouts to see which way he would move. He hoped that by driving hurriedly into the slantrock before the scouts doubled back, that he had escaped notice, and that Beckwourth would assume he had taken his trimming and headed back toward the Platte in defeat. If this happened, he would have the freedom he would need.

Tugend and the others assumed they were holding up to give the Crows a chance to move out of the immediate country, to avoid possibility of encountering stragglers who might take Beckwourth's visit as a precedent and attack them. Menafee was satisfied to let them believe this.

He sat in the slantrock camp for three days, holding his companions restlessly in check and measuring his chances. If these men had been of the mountain kind, he would have had no doubts. But it was hard to know how far river men would go, or how well they would appreciate the necessity out of which he planned to act.

Certainly he could not expect them—to whom Jim Bridger and Fitzpatrick and the Sublettes were merely names, already legendary—to have his own loyalty to the men across the mountains. He could not expect them to understand how important freedom from Company domination was to the little and nameless men who actually ran the trap lines of the high valleys.

On the fourth morning Menafee turned the company out and, holding to depressed country where their movement was not likely to be seen, he headed northwestward, bending in midday toward the west. And when they issued from the slantrock onto the broad slope of a rise lying between the course of the Sweetwater and the next watershed, he called a halt, although there were a good three hours of light left.

There was some surprise at the halt and some uneasiness over his westward swing. Menafee called Tugend over before any of the brigade could make an issue of these things.

"Max, we've still got to travel easy," he said. "The trail I want is on the other side of that ridge. Thought I'd like to see if it was empty before we crossed. Want to come along?"

Tugend shifted his heavy body and glanced back at his companions. He faced Mike again without friendliness.

"Yuh're plumb right, Menafee," he growled. "I aim to stick beside yuh every move till yuh've got us headed back toward the river. Mebbe we've got to cut the tracks yuh've been makin' to get out of these badlands, but none of us are shore of even that."

Murmurs of assent rose from the others. Menafee smiled deceptively.

"Any man who thinks he can captain this brigade and do a better job than me can step forward. Any time, Max."

He waited. Tugend shifted again in his saddle.

"Don't get ringy, Mike," he protested. "It's just that we don't like any of this. The country's too high, and we've got no business in it, now. But you're still boss. Let's take a look at that ridge."

MENAFEE eased. His respect for Tugend was growing. The man was green, this far from the river, all right, and he was stubborn and could be troublesome. But he wasn't being stampeded by the unrest among his companions. If he started notching his own stick, it would be only because he was fully convinced Menafee's leadership was dangerous.

Leaving the rest of the party to bivouac, Mike lined out for the crest of the low, distant divide, with Tugend beside him. A two-hour ride brought them into the base of a saw-tooth serration which crowned the summit. There was a gap in this, just above them. Mike angled into it, rode through, and pulled aside. Tugend reined up abreast of him.

A verdant valley lay below, even more beautiful than Mike had remembered it. A little valley, reaching out from the foot of the Wind River Mountains to a junction with a larger and less lush valley. A narrow, swift stream glinted in the low red sunlight. And on the stream, in the open, was a solid but hastily erected pole-and-log quadrangle, behind which were a few scattered Indian lodges. Menafee gestured toward the stream.

"The Poposia," he said. "The Popo Agie. And down there where the valleys meet, it joins the Wind River to form the Bighorn. That square down there is what I've been headin' for. The temporary post Beckwourth said the Big Company had set up here. The place where he took our packs. Think we could take them back, Max?"

Tugend looked long at the crude post, then swore softly.

"Do yuh have to be crazy to get along in these mountains?" he asked. "Yuh stand still while a thief in buckskin and a pack of renegade Indians ride unchallenged into our camp and steal us blind. The odds are too stiff to buck, yuh say, and I believe yuh. Then, when we're clear and I think we're kitin' for home, yuh show me a fort where the same bunch is holed up—where even I can see the odds for shore—and yuh ask me can be get our packs back! Yuh'd swim a river if there was a bridge fifty feet downstream, wouldn't yuh, Menafee?"

Mike chuckled. "It just looks that way," he answered. "Out here, same as any place else, if a man takes a swing at yuh, yuh swing back. The Big Company jumped us—and they'll make a profit on our packs if they keep 'em. There's a factor down there who gave Beckwourth his orders. Somethin' has got to be done about him. He's dangerous to the trade. I figger he ought to show up at the rendezvous on the Green. Mebbe the boys there can make a free-trader out of him. And Rocky Mountain could do with a little profit on some Big Company goods. Business, Max. Sound business, nothin' personal, like Beckwourth said."

"But the odds—" Tugend repeated, incredulously.

"Don't let 'em fool yuh," Menafee told him. "Beckwourth said he had a small pardnership in the Big Company—probably a share in local earnin's. That makes him and his Crows an expensive outfit to the company. They'll keep Jim almighty busy to make him earn his cost. If we fooled Beckwourth's scouts and Jim thinks we're bound back to the river, he won't be down there at that post. There should be a lot of little independent parties movin' already toward the Green. Jim will have moved on with his Crows to pay some of these a visit like the one he paid us."

"There's lodges down there."

"Not enough for the bunch with Jim. Shelter for the women and the old ones they've left behind, that's all. I'll prove it if you and the boys will ride down there tonight with me."

Tugend's incredulousness began to fade. A tight, wry grin began to pull at his lips.

"Mebbe we run a little scary, down on the river, Mike," he said slowly, "but now and then we'll take a gamble, too. Don't it beat tunket what a man'll do for twenty a month and grub?"

At their fireless supper, Tugend talked long with the others in the crew. Apart, Mike saw the stocky Dutchman argue with unaccustomed fire. Grinning a little, he noted that Tugend was unconsciously already beginning to employ some of the gestures and sign work of the hands which usually went unnoticed by the unfamiliar, and made the spoken conversation of buckskin men seem terse, monosyllabic, and incomplete.

At the end of half an hour, Tugend crossed to Menafee.

"A sorry bunch of gamblers, Mike!" he said sourly. "I'm sorry. None of them give a hoot for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company or the bunch waitin' for us on the Green. They want to get back to the Missouri and get paid. I had to make an issue of it, and then only part of 'em would go along with me. One bunch will ride with us. The

other will bring the stock up on the ridge where we were this afternoon. If we show 'em the right kind of a signal from below, they'll come on down when the fun's over. Otherwise, they'll bust off on their own."

TUGEND paused. Mike nodded reluctant agreement. This wasn't the most workable arrangement, but it would have to do. Beckwourth and his Crows, as well as raiding, were undoubtedly support for this post. As such, they wouldn't be too far away. A day's ride—two at most. And certainly a messenger would get away to Jim the moment the party showed up, so there wouldn't be too much time. If Beckwourth overtook them before they reached South Pass, there would be trouble.

"And one other condition, Mike," Tugend went on regretfully. "The boys think we'll go on our face on this. They want a promise from you that if we hit solid trouble on the Poposia, yuh'll retreat before we're hurt, and that yuh'll head right back for the Missouri then."

Menafee frowned. This wasn't good. Men who wanted to head home could lie down tonight and deliberately wreck the raid. And there was always the possibility he had calculated the odds wrong. In either case, his promise would hold him and he would have to give up any other attempt to deliver trade goods at the Green River rendezvous.

He knew his men were watching him narrowly. He forced a confident grin at Max Tugend.

"I think our bunch can make as big a row of tracks as the best of Ashley's men, Max," he said heartily. "We'll make us a little history when we show up on the Green."

"The devil with the Green!" a man growled. "What about that promise?"

"You've got it," Mike answered shortly. . . .

The moon dropped behind the Wind River Mountains an hour before midnight, and Menafee started his party downslope into the Poposia Valley, leaving half of the brigade in the notch on the ridge to watch the outcome below. He had twelve men, in addition to Max Tugend. Fourteen of them dropping down across the grass toward the darkened Big Company outpost.

A mile from the little river Menafee pulled up.

"There'll be dogs at the Indian lodges," he said. "We can't get in without some warnin'. Bunch close to me and head right for the gate. We'll ride through it. Our pack animals will be inside. The packs should be there, too. And some extra Big Company mules. Cut yourselves into three bunches. One is to break into the storeroom and make up some packs for the extra animals—fast. Powder, shot, and hardware, first. French powder, if there is any. It's best. Then anything else. The second bunch is to load the animals. The third to guard the others. But don't a man of yuh fire a shot unless I order it!"

"Yuh expect us to take a whole cussed little fort without burnin' powder?" a man protested.

"I expect yuh to obey orders!" Mike rasped. "One hasty trigger-pull might make this somethin' more than a business raid, and I don't want responsibility for startin' a full war in the mountains."

"What do you and Max do while we're at the dirty work?" someone else asked unpleasantly.

"I want the factor down there. Max and I are goin' to get him—before he can give orders to whoever he's got with him, if possible. He ordered Beckwourth's raid on us. Let him pay for it. Now, let's go!"

Menafee set his horse forward, with Tugend beside him. The rest strung out unwillingly. Mike swore to himself. He doubted this outpost had much of a crew, since it was temporary and plainly established only for a base of harrying operations against independents headed over South Pass. He thought that with half a dozen experienced partisans, this little sortie would go as smoothly as a flying arrow. But it was something else to make a raid with an unwilling company, and the sullen bad humor of those

at his back made him uneasy.

A single mistake—an unnecessary shot, a man killed carelessly — could well be a spark into the open keg of powder upon which the whole trade rested this season. But the risk had to be taken. The Big Company, down to its least important factor, had to learn that the old brigade would cling to its rights in the mountain country as long as a few of Ashley's men were left in the mountains.

A small tributary stream led into the Poposia above the darkened post. Menafee's party splashed through this before the dogs among the scattered Crow lodges behind the quadrangle sounded an alarm. Almost immediately light blossomed behind the walls, indicating a blanketed fire had been kept burning there against need. Twisting in his saddle, Mike barked a command:

"Hold steady for the gate—and not too fast!"

Then he raised his voice in a ululating yell, ending with an identifying phrase:

"Friends of Jim Beckwourth!"

Mike saw shadows appear on the footworks inside the wall, but the guards held their fire, misled by his hail. And the gate, a flimsy affair of brush and poles, was dead ahead.

Mike put his horse into it. The barrier went down. A rifle banged above and he heard the hum of a ball. He swung his own weapon up and sang out sharply:

"Hold it, there."

III

ONLY two men were on the footworks and one had already emptied his rifle. The other carefully lowered his weapon and stepped away from it. Two half-dressed, sleepy clerks, shaken with alarm and uncertainty, not fully knowing if this was another of a mountain-man's typical hoorawing entries into a trading post or whether this was attack.

At a gesture from Menafee they clattered down the ladder from the footworks to the compound. Another man appeared beyond the central fire, from which sheltering buffalo hides had been swiftly ripped. Max Tugend rode toward him and the fellow loped obediently across to join the pair from the wall. Relief surged through Menafee.

This was the extent of this outpost's defense in Beckwourth's absence, further proof that the veteran mountain man and his party of Crows could not be too far distant. Further proof of the need for haste.

The missing packs and their animals were in the compound. So, also, were a number of strange animals. Menafee dismounted.

"Turn to!" he barked at his men and, with Tugend following him, he approached the wide-eyed clerks.

"Who's yore factor?" he asked one.

Speech came hard for the clerk. Only one word was intelligible!

"—Celeste."

It was enough. The Celestes were a fabulously wealthy family of St. Louis traders, of a kind with the Chouteaus and Chabannes, and they owned a big slice of American Fur. It wasn't surprising to find a member of the family here, for they were working millionaires.

Menafee was pleased. He wanted the Big Company to learn something of the strength and determination of the independents in their own country, and it was fortunate to find a member of a controlling family to be sent East in the fall with a report of what he had seen and heard at the summer rendezvous on the Green.

"Turn him out!" he ordered.

The clerks glanced at one another unwillingly and started to protest in unison. Menafee shrugged impatiently.

"I'll do it myself," he growled. "Max, keep an eye on these boys. Set 'em to work helping our boys with those packs."

Tugend nodded. Menafee crossed the compound and pushed open the buffalo robe over the doorway of what was obviously the factor's quarters. Two young Crow women were cowering against one wall.

The room was exceptionally neat. There was a pleasant scent of perfume in the air. Mike grinned. These American-French trade aristocrats lived well, wherever they were. He wondered if this Celeste who could contrive a touch of elegance on the Poposia would still smell so pleasantly after he had been camped for three weeks on the Green River. It seemed unlikely.

There was another hanging robe beyond the two Indian women, and light showed beyond it. Menafee pushed past the women and brushed the robe aside. There had been no resistance elsewhere in this post. He anticipated none here. Elegance and sand did not too often go together. But he underestimated the occupant of this inner room.

It seemed to Menafee that he walked full into the muzzle-bloom of a pistol. He saw the red flame. Powder stung his face. Thunder was in his ears. And a hard blow against his head slammed him into the framing of the door. He caught at the frame with both hands for support, but strength ran suddenly from him and he fell limply, helplessly forward. . . .

MENAFEE did not know how much later it was when his first impression was of being cold. This gradually expanded to a feeling of being pinioned, wrapped tightly. This, in turn, fined down to an awareness that he lay on bare ground under a shelter of some kind, and that he had been rolled in a blanket.

His head hurt abominably and he was conscious of a bandage and dressing on it. Through the open front of the shelter in which he lay he could see the thin smoke of a fire against gray dawn sky and beyond the smoke, in silhouette against the sky, the weathered granite shoulder of a mountain peak. A peak which looked familiar, and the familiarity troubled him.

Working an arm free of the blanket, he lifted a handful of earth from the floor of the shelter. It was a brilliant red. He opened his fingers and let it fall. His memory wheeled back.

He had walked into a gunshot in an inner room of the Big Company outpost on the Poposia. Now he lay under a shelter in Red Rock Canyon, the eastern approach to South Pass, and so close to the summit that the peak forming the northern abutment of this high road across the back of the mountains was visible from where he lay. It didn't make sense.

He fought free of the tangling blanket and crawled to the entrance of the shelter. Men squatted about breakfast fires, hunched a little by the gray threat of a spring snow squall hanging over the higher country to the west. His men. Pack animals were browsing on the sparse grass of the canyon floor. Pack saddles were neatly stacked. Baled goods—more baled goods than he had loaded on the banks of the Missouri—made another orderly heap. And breakfast smell was good in the air.

Max Tugend came from behind the shelter, knelt to look into it, and saw Menafee. His eyes lighted.

"Mike, yuh're around!" he cried.

"Partly," Menafee agreed wryly. "What is this?"

"Camp," Tugend said smugly. "On the way up the Pass. We did the best we could. Saved a saddle for yuh when yuh went down. Saved another for the —uh—factor down there that shot yuh. Loaded the rest of the saddles with supplies and pulled out. Fired the post when we left, to give friend Beckwourth something to think about."

Menafee nodded with a feeling of gratitude. This was a good man. Firing the Poposia post was only debatably wise, but it was too late for concern over it, now, and the burning had left Jim Beckwourth or any other Big Company force without a base of operations close to the pass.

It was possible that it might force a union between Beckwourth and any other Big Company forces in the basins east of the Wind River. United, they might feel themselves strong enough to move in unison against the Rocky Mountain rendezvous on the Green. This was something to know about. And

the factor Max had hauled off from the Poposia would know the strength and location of any company forces within five hundred miles.

"It's been good huntin', Max," he told Tugend gratefully. "The boys pulled with yuh, after all, then?"

"Shore," Tugend agreed calmly. "When I busted a couple of heads and promised them all shares in the Big Company stuff we hauled away from the Poposia. Then, mebbe the factor from down there had somethin' to do with it, too."

Menafee nodded, cutting it.

"Good! Good! Bring that factor over here, Max. I want to talk to him."

Tugend's grin widened.

"Look, Mike," he said. "There's somethin' yuh ought to know about that factor. He ain't—"

"Get him over here," Mike interrupted. "We may have a hornet's nest on our tails and I've got to find out."

Tugend shrugged, still grinning. "Yuh're apt to have a hornet's nest on the end of your nose, Mike," he said. "Better put on your pants."

Menafee glanced down at himself, saw that he was partially undressed, and drew the blanket in which he had been wrapped, about him. He sat down in front of his shelter to wait. The men at the fire grinned at him—not so much in greeting, he thought, as in joyous anticipation, and he was puzzled. Tugend reappeared, accompanied by another figure. Menafee heard Tugend's voice but faintly.

"Miss Antoinette Celeste," Tugend said.

"Tony Celeste!" the figure beside him corrected sharply.

"I tried to tell yuh that factor wasn't a him but a her, Mike," Tugend added maliciously.

Menafee blinked. He was suddenly acutely conscious that the wrapped blanket was an untidy and unsatisfactory substitute for his breeches. He was aware of the neglected, unscrubbed stubble on his face and the greasy, uncombed hang of his long hair. He knew the picture he presented, hunched in the opening of his shelter, bandaged head and all—a cross between a drunken Indian and a renegade white. And somehow his appearance before this girl seemed vastly more important than the questions he had been so impatient to ask the factor of the outpost on the Poposia.

THE GIRL beside Tugend was small, imperious, and incredibly feminine—more an incarnation of a fur man's restless, solitary dreaming than an actuality. A beaded doeskin band of a kind Menafee had never seen on an Indian woman gathered the girl's finely combed jet hair close about her head. Below this it fell in a rich cascade to her shoulders.

Her features were strong, containing a strange admixture of arrogance and warm seduction. Her skin was a deep sun color. No gown on a river belle ever contrived to be more artful or revealing than the low-necked, long-sleeved jacket and short divided skirt of beautifully tanned fawnskin which she wore. And beaded, thigh-length moccasion leggings of similar material sheathed her legs. Menafee understood much about her in this first instant of astonishment and pleasure.

There was an easy freedom of movement in her body which women of the river did not have, and could never learn. There was a fierceness in her eyes which had not been learned in the great houses of St. Louis. And yet she most certainly owned a share of the proud French blood of the Celestes.

Mike Menafee had been too often into the mountains not to understand the loneliness of a trader a thousand miles from his kind. He had sat too often in the lodges of great men on the Missouri and Yellowstone and Snake—great men of the Sioux and Blackfeet and Nez Perce—to draw a definition of color between one man and another or between a man and a woman. Here was proof of his wisdom.

This girl's mother had been a Nez Perce, he thought, as surely as her father had been a Celeste. And she was

the most beautiful creature he had ever seen.

The girl looked long at Menafee, her eyes mocking.

"Big Mike," she said finally. "Big Mike Menafee! Argh!" She gripped the tip of her nose with two fingers of one hand.

"You were in charge on the Poposia?" Mike asked her carefully.

"But of course!" Tony Celeste answered. "Is it so surprising? Because I am a woman, perhaps? Why not? Does Mike Menafee make the Big Company afraid—or Jim Bridger or any of the rest? Judge for yourself. They sent a woman against them."

Max Tugend laughed.

"Ain't I had a time the last couple of days, Mike?" he asked. "Yuh can see for yourself."

"Jim Beckwourth is headquarterin' on the Poposia," Menafee protested sharply to the girl. "I know him. The day hasn't dawned that Jim would take orders from a woman!"

"What you say!" the girl answered derisively. "The biggest squaw-taker of them all, and he wouldn't listen to Tony Celeste? Lister, *M'sieu* Big Mike Menafee, even what I *think* is a command to Jim Beckwourth!"

"I've been through all this, Mike," Tugend cut in good-naturedly. "Tony is pullin' yore leg a little because yuh're captain of this brigade and she didn't like gettin' hauled up here on a pack saddle. She's had a time herself on the Poposia. The Celestes had her in school at St. Louis for three years. This spring she ran away and caught up with a half-brother on his way out to run the Poposia station. He decided she might be useful out here, blindin' troublesome independents, and he let her come along. She did a good job on Beckwourth all right, but—"

"But, *sacre,* I don't mix business and the love!" the girl exploded. "The Beckwourth, does he see this? No! A bear in buckskins, always around. And jealous of the brother, even. He don't leave the post with his Crows unless the brother goes, also. And there is much to be done, so Etienne goes with the Beckwourth. So who is to run the post, then? But of course I am the factor! And I am sorry I don't shoot the pistol good, *M'sieu* Big Mike Menafee. I don't like the face of you and I wanted practice for shooting the Beckwourth, besides."

"Poor Jim!" Menafee breathed weakly as the torrent subsided. "Now I see why he changed blankets and joined the Big Company. And look what he got for it!"

Tugend laughed. Tony Celeste stamped her foot.

"Animals!" she cried. "Animals! But you'll learn not to laugh at a Celeste. You'll learn when a Celeste wants a trade, that trade belongs to him. These are my mountains. The Big Company is mine. Soon you'll see I don't joke!"

IV

MENAFEE frowned. There was earnestness in this girl, Tony Celeste. Still shaken with astonishment and amusement, he felt suddenly uneasy.

"How soon will I see you don't joke?" he asked her sharply.

"Today—tonight!" the girl said triumphantly. "This stupid one — this Max—he thinks it was his idea to burn the post. But I gave it to him. And the Beckwourth is proud. The Etienne Celeste is proud. It won't do for the mountains to hear Big Mike Menafee has beaten them and burned down their roof to prove how easy it was. And both have the love for Tony Celeste. Etienne will have a brother's fears and the Beckwourth will have his black jealousy. They will ride hard. And I left them a trail. A broken stick at every turn. They will know how to follow it."

Menafee glanced at Tugend. Max grinned uncertainly.

"Never run across something like this along the river," he said wryly. "Reckon she's right about firin' the post. She raised such a ruckus about how bad a burnin' would make the Big Company

feel that it seemed a fine idea. And mebbe she bent some twigs on the trail. Didn't watch her too close. But it all don't amount to much. Her brother and Beckwourth would be mighty glad to get rid of such a little hellion. If they follow us at all, it'll be for the packs, Mike. And there won't be any shootin' trouble, at worst. Yuh said yoreself that this was a business squabble, not a war."

"This kind of business can turn into a war almighty fast when a woman shows up in it," Menafee said flatly. "Beckwourth fancies he's prime plew with women. Miss Celeste's right. The fact his headquarters were burned and what he figgers is his woman gone will build a fire under Jim. And the brother will want these packs twice as bad, now we've got his sister. Did yuh camp us where we could stand off trouble if it comes?"

"Didn't give it any thought, Mike," Tugend admitted unhappily. "Mebbe I didn't do so good, after all, bringin' the girl along. She ain't the factor yuh expected to find on the Poposia?"

"Not exactly," Menafee said drily. "If we hauled her into the rendezvous with no strings on her, every man on the Green River would be at his neighbor's throat in an hour."

"What do we do, then?" Tugend asked.

Menafee eyed the girl and smiled slowly.

"Do?" he repeated. "There's a squall makin' up ahead. I hate to move camp if it comes this way. These spring storms can be bad ones. Drop a couple of the boys down the canyon to where they've got clear lookin' to see if there's anything movin' behind us. Be shore they don't miss anything. That's for you. Me, I'm goin' to try slippin' some kind of a noose onto Miss Celeste so the boy'll know it's hands off if we ever get over the pass."

"Remember what happened to Beckwourth," Tugend said cryptically, and he moved across the camp.

Presently Max and two others mounted and rode out of the camp. The rest of the men, apparently on Tugend's order, started reforming the mounds of saddles and packs in a rough shelter. Tony Celeste sat cross-legged on the ground, facing Menafee in the entrance to his shelter, eyeing him steadily. When her scrutiny became almost unbearable, she suddenly smiled.

"I said you were beasts—animals," she said. "That wasn't Tony Celeste talking. That was Etienne and my uncles. There is something about leather men."

"Shore," Menafee agreed with mocking sobriety. "They're beautiful."

Anger sparked in the girl's eyes.

"Why do I waste my time?" she cried. "What difference does it make? One trapper and another are all the same. They smell of sweat and dirt, and they think only of the fur. All right, I think only of the fur, then! I want peace in the mountains. The Big Company is strong. The Little Company is weak. Let the strong win. That's the shortest road to peace. If there were brains in that big, whiskered body of yours, you'd see that. You have an hour to see it—maybe a day, that's all. If Etienne arrives before you have promised me you will join with us, one of the Beckwourth's Crows will finish the job I tried to do with the pistol on the Poposia. Think of that, *M'sieu* Menafee!"

The girl bounded to her feet and crossed to the fires where the grinning partisans made eager room for her. In a moment she was unconcernedly at breakfast with them, passing banter with the most aggressive of the lot with perfect ease.

Menafee glanced briefly at the storm clouds up the slopes. They were thickening. This would be a good morning to be securely in camp, and he was grateful for the shelter of the canyon walls. He turned his attention back to the girl, his mind wandering.

THERE had to be something in the mountains which brought a man back to them repeatedly. There had to be something in the fur trade that kept a man forever on long trails when the

best he could hope for was an occasional good season. He thought it was a feeling of freedom—serenity, perhaps —a beauty that came from the untouched quality of the country. The kind of beauty which made Tony Celeste stand far above the soft and scented women on the river.

He was still watching the girl among his men when Tugend and the others came hammering back up the canyon. Max rode almost to him before dismounting in a sliding halt.

"We're in for it, Mike!" Tugend breathed. "It looks like the whole Crow Nation's on our trail. And more, besides. A bunch of whites. Comin' up fast, without even botherin' to have scouts on the ridges. That little devil must have left a clean trail to follow."

"Or you did, Max," Menafee said softly. "It takes doin' to move in this country without leavin' sign. Get the boys up and at the animals. We'll pull up into that weather ahead. It may give us a chance."

"The boys figgered we had downgrade from here," Tugend said. "They may not hit the harness when those fools who were with me have told 'em what's coming!"

"Pass along the word," Menafee said. "We'll see how it goes. Mebbe it's time the boys got a lesson I should have given 'em weeks ago."

Tugend moved into the group at the fires. Already the men had been brought to their feet by the report of the two men who had ridden down the canyon with Tugend. Max immediately ran into argument.

Tony Celeste thrust her way into the center of the protesting knot. Menafee could hear the caustic mockery of her tones, if not her words. The brigade men wavered a little before her, but faced Tugend with a sullen defiance.

Menafee crawled into his shelter and rummaged for his pistol. He lacked time to recharge it, but he spilled the old priming and replaced it with fresh. Knotting his blanket about his waist and thrusting the pistol under it, he moved toward the defiant men. One, a hulking big packer named Eaton, had been louder in his grumbling than the others from the beginning. Menafee spoke to him.

"Our brush with Beckwourth was a skirmish between two small parties," he said steadily. "Now that we've burned his headquarters, he's had to fall back on the main Big Company forces, and main forces don't skirmish—they fight! The bunch comin' up the canyon wants our packs, still, but they want our hair now, too. They intend to go on over the pass, now that they're strong enough, and break up the gatherin' on the Green. This is a chance for the Big Company to break Rocky Mountain Fur's back before it's really born. We're all of us goin' to have to sweat, Eaton, includin' you. Get the boys to work on those packs!"

"Let 'em have the packs and the girl," Eaton said savagely. "Let 'em have what they want. It's a bluff. Beckwourth and you are friends. He's one of yore kind. He won't plow yuh under. The whole blasted country knows how leather men stick together."

"Against outside enemies, mebbe," Menafee agreed. "But the fur business wasn't built by soft men or impractical ones. Beckwourth honestly believes the Big Company is best for the trade. It'd pain him to count me down, but where it's his own skin and judgment against mine, I don't count. And I'm tellin' yuh, Eaton, where it's this company's skin against yores, you don't count either. I gave an order. You and the boys gets those packs up!"

Eaton maintained his scorn.

"I told yuh we'd had enough of bluffing, Menafee! The devil with the packs! Me and the boys are taking the best horses and —"

The man turned away, followed by fully half of the men in the group. Menafee's voice reached after him:

"Eaton!"

The man whipped around, gun leaping from his belt. Menafee's hand tightened on the grip of his own pistol. The heavy, awkward weapon surged against his palm, spewing out a gout of oily black

smoke. Eaton's body rocked with a blow. A look of stupid surprise crossed his face. He reached ineffectually for a hurt somewhere in his torso, took a staggering step, and fell heavily.

"Anybody else didn't hear my order?" Menafee asked quietly.

FOR an instant there was no movement, then the mutinous packers swung hurriedly toward the pack animals. Max Tugend and Tony Celeste crossed to Menafee. The fun and the concern was gone from Tugend's square face. He was looking at the pistol Mike had thrust back into his belt. He jerked his head toward the red dust beside Eaton's body, slowly darkening with the man's blood.

"That ain't pretty, Menafee," he said unsteadily.

Mike nodded. "It would be worse if the hair was gone, too," he said shortly. "And if those fools had pulled off from us, they wouldn't have gone a dozen miles before some Crows branchin' out from here would have overtaken them. Our one chance is to stick together. It was Eaton or us all."

Tugend nodded reluctant comprehension and turned to the task of directing the breaking of camp. Tony Celeste eyed Menafee thoughtfully.

"I think Etienne did not know the truth when he said that Beckwourth was the most dangerous of the Little Company. I think he made a mistake when he asked me to help him hire the Beckwourth. It should have been big Mike Menafee."

"Don't be too shore that you and yore brother bought all of Jim Beckwourth's loyalty, Tony," Menafee told her. "We're a long way from Green River, yet—but so are yore brother and his Big Company men!"

Wind came down the canyon before all of the packs were up. The animals turned rumps into it, making them harder to load. The wind was cold and carried the restless forewarnings of mountain storm with it. The clouds which had been local and angrily dark, indicating a mere squall, had settled heavily along the crest of the whole range and were rolling majestically down toward the foothills. Menafee watched them and said nothing. He saw that Tony Celeste was watching both the clouds and himself closely. And there was a shadow in her eyes.

Menafee thought he understood. The mountains bred a strong respect in those who knew them. Among the Indians, it sired legends. This pass, like one further north, was called Two-go-tee, and it was said that on Two-go-tee seven devils lived. The oldest and the most evil of these was the Wind god, and the next was the god of Snow. When the two moved together, there was no life above timberline and any living thing which attempted a crossing of Two-go-tee was certain to die.

It was more than a legend. It was the essence of the experience of a whole people for countless generations. The girl was afraid of the brewing storm. He crossed to her.

"You can have the best hoss in camp when we pull out," he said gently. "You can ride down the canyon to meet yore brother, once we're on the move. It's goin' to be nasty, up where we're goin'."

For an instant gratitude was bright in the girl's eyes. Then her imperious scorn returned, driving it out.

"And have the Beckwourth claim he saved me from death?" she cried. "And have it known across the mountains that a Celeste was afraid to go where you went? No, *M'sieu* Mike, this Tony will be with you. And when the wind blows she will laugh. When there is ice in your beard, she will sing. And when Etienne finds you, he will find me waiting, his work already done by Tony and the gods of Two-go-tee!"

Menafee grinned.

"Big talk," he said. "There's an extra robe in my pack. Better get it. Yuh're shivering, already."

The girl glared at him, but Mike saw, a few minutes later, that she was wearing the robe when she mounted the horse Max Tugend led up for her.

The packers still eyed Menafee sullenly, but they had been efficient in

breaking camp. There was no sign of pursuit yet when they worked up out of the Red Rock canyon into the bald shoulders rising toward South Pass.

Still, it was wise to ride at the rear. A rifle could be discharged accidentally on the march, and Mike was well aware that he had not yet convinced these river men that there was a savage side to the men of the mountains—that what had begun half as a prank by a mountain man on one side of a fence against one on the other was now resolving itself into the first clash of the conflict every man in the trade had long known was inevitable between the Big Company and those who opposed it.

NOT necessarily iron-handed oppression, but a trial of strength, a test of the Big Company's more or less honest claim that it could best serve the interests of the entire trade. A hard thing to understand, unless one knew that mountain men did not hate the idea of a company which limited their freedom half so much as they hated the idea of a company which made St. Louis traders who had never seen a mountain saddle rich at their expense.

A hard thing to understand unless one realized that Mr. Astor and the Chouteaus and King McKenzie believed themselves right, also. They held that their investments in money and post buildings and river steamers and connections in the world fur market were worth more than the risks which every fur man in the hills took daily.

Menafee realized that the failure of his men to understand the thing in which they were caught was unimportant, now, so long as he exercised personal caution. What loomed as a greater danger was that when the full weight of the storm above them hit, they would be broken by it.

There was a certain amount of bluff in such a storm. It struck with incredible savagery. Falling snow became a wall it seemed a man could not penetrate. The cold became unbelievable. And landmarks were obliterated. Every sense became paralyzed with fear.

A man could survive. Animals could survive. The storm could be penetrated. But only if a man clung to the belief that this was so.

V

AS THE VELOCITY of the wind increased, men and animals instinctively bunched more closely together and their pace slowed. Max Tugend dropped back to ride with Mike Menafee for a few minutes. It was already necessary to shout to be clearly heard.

"We're goin' on over the pass?" Max asked.

"No," Menafee told him. "But keep it to yoreself. Keep the boys thinkin' we are. We couldn't make it, but I don't want 'em to be expectin' a halt. In half an hour there won't be a possibility of Beckwourth and Celeste overtakin' us. Somewheres beyond that point, we can hole up. We'll have to or we'll freeze. If we can see enough to pick a sheltered place, we'll be all right. Then it's hunker down and wait, Max."

"What happens when the storm is over?" Tugend asked shrewdly. "How will we be any better off? The Big Company will still be just behind us."

Menafee nodded. "But if we drive into this an hour, we'll gain a little on those behind us. The Crows won't go too long in this kind of a thing. And when the storm's gone, the higher country ahead of us will be swept pretty clean by the wind. We should have light goin', while the Big Company bunch should be far enough down in the canyons to have deep drifts to buck. We might gain as much as a day or two, out of that alone. Enough for us to get our warnin' onto the Green in time and a reception fixed up for Beckwourth and Etienne Celeste over there."

Tugend nodded satisfaction with the explanation and rode forward again. Tony Celeste dropped back beside Mike.

"Pretty soon," she howled at him, grinning wickedly. "Two-go-tee."

Menafee made the sign used from immemorial time in the mountain country to silence a wordy squaw and grinned at the deep, angry flush which rose in the

girl's cheeks. It was an indelicate but highly effective gesture. A few minutes later the first flurry of hard, brittlely crystalline snow struck, and the girl rode forward into the scant lee of the mules and their packs.

Dropping temperature and the biting force of the wind made breathing a painful, knifing effort. Ice formed in the ragged bristles of Menafee's beard. The unhealed slash of the head crease Tony Celeste's bullet had inflicted began to harden and draw in the cold so that Mike's scalp felt as if a steel band, slightly tightening, encircled it.

He watched the animals uneasily. Half an hour passed, an hour. The storm was still rising in pitch. Snow pellets now rode the wind with rifle-ball velocity and the wind itself had become a barrier into which men and animals leaned heavily. And there was sound, an eerie rushing howl, which frayed a man's nerves as would driven gravel.

Mike clumsily recharged his pistol. He kept one hand thrust through the front of his jacket and spread against the flesh of his chest, so that the fingers would remain warm and flexible. If panic rose in the party now, it would destroy them all. This was no squall, no mountain flurry. This was what the legends warned of in the high passes too early in the year.

A mule stopped, head-down, an iced snow coating completely blanketing the front of its head from ears to muzzle, covering even the eyes. Menafee swung stiffly down from his own horse. The necessity for all of this lay in the packs on the animals. Without the packs, there was no necessity.

He had the stricken mule's load transferred to his own animal and they moved on. Another pack animal fell and could not rise. Max Tugend wordlessly surrendered his horse.

Menafee swore silently and bitterly to himself. A bowstring could be stretched only so tight. There was a limit to endurance. There had to be an end to this —soon. He plowed forward to check with Tony Celeste. He found the girl crying silently. There was no way to know she was crying, save by the expression in her eyes, for the cold had distorted her features and tears were ice before they were formed, and the racking of sobbing was no different than the struggling effort for breath in the wind. He was beside the girl, clinging to the low pommel of her saddle, before he knew.

"Yuh little fool!" he shouted raggedly at her. "Why did yuh stick with us then?"

"To be sure the Beckwourth and Etienne followed you," she answered.

Menafee shook his head and pushed on, overtaking the rest to reach Max Tugend.

"Did yuh get a good look at the bunch behind us?" he asked. Tugend nodded. "Were they movin' with pack animals?" Menafee added.

"No," Max shouted in answer. "Just what they were ridin'. That's all."

"And all the supplies on the Poposia went up when yuh fired the post?"

TUGEND nodded again.

There was a shout from the rear. Two more pack animals were down. When the party started moving again, two packers were on foot. Menafee stabbed at the whirling white wall ahead of them, his mind going desperately once again over his memory of the track through South Pass, sorting out recollections of side slopes which might mislead blind travelers, searching frantically for remembrance of a shelter somewhere along this segment of the trail.

While he was doing this, he became suddenly aware of a lightening in the pressure of the wind, an increase in his range of vision, a recession in the savagery of the storm. A granite wall rose before him. Flanking it was a stand of green timber, drooping with the weight of ice and snow, and tossing restlessly in the wind.

He shouted at Tugend and turned, heading for the base of the wall. There was a little open, and the wind continued to ease in violence as they worked closer to the upthrust. Smoke

streaks on the vertical granite told of earlier storms when it had offered shelter. And a flash flood had brought down deadfalls in quantity from somewhere above. A gray heap of fuel lay at the base of the stone.

The remaining animals, sensing shelter, lifted their heads. The men afoot moved with more lively step. Menafee halted when he reached the surface of the rock.

The storm had not abated. Concussion from above shook the eddy against the face of this cliff so hard that words and sounds were queerly distorted. But the wind itself was howling across the eddy above it and little snow was sifting down on the sheltered little table against the upthrust.

With cold, clumsy hands part of the crew started spilling packs from the exhausted, half-frozen animals. Others set about dragging up firewood and slender deadfalls from which the framework of an additional shelter could be rigged. Menafee moved swiftly through the mules, then came back to Tugend.

"We'll lose half of the animals," he said. "We had to go a little too long."

"Then we'll leave half of the packs when we pull out again?" Max asked.

Menafee shook his head. "It may be a week before the pass can be climbed by the outfit. And time grows important. There'll be no game this high for days after a storm like this. Mebbe there's enough browse under the snow here for the animals that live, but the men have to eat. I'm goin' on, now. I'll hit the upper Green at the western foot of the pass. There'll be a camp there. Bridger and Broken Hand, at least. They'll have game, food. And extra animals. By the time the weather starts to clear, we'll be back."

"Yuh're crazy!" Tugend protested.

Menafee shook his head. "I'm brigade captain—and my job ain't finished yet."

"Then I'll go with yuh!"

Menafee shook his head again. He opened his jacket and produced his pistol, its horn and patch-box and shot pouch. He handed these to Tugend.

"I want to find every man here in camp when I get back, Max," he said quietly. "Yuh'll lose any that leave. It's better to lose 'em before they start. The rest will have a chance, then."

"Like Eaton, eh?" Tugend murmured. "I understand, Mike. But if yuh go on in this storm, yuh won't come back."

"I have to," Mike answered.

Moving away from Tugend he hunkered down beside Tony Celeste where she crouched above the first flickering of a fire.

"Stick close to Max," he told her. "This may be a bad camp before I get back. Stick close to Max and keep out of the men's sight as much as possible. It doesn't do to drop sparks on opened powder."

The girl looked up at him quickly.

"You're running out!" she charged wickedly. "All of us can't get through, so you're going alone!"

"As far as Green River anyway," Menafee agreed. "As far as the first camp where I can get spare animals and some help."

"Go ahead!" Tony cried. "The Beckwourth and Etienne are not so far below here. They will have come and gone before you even reach the Green River. There won't be anything for you to come back to. Stay on Green River. The Beckwourth and Etienne and Tony will be there in a week and we will make it even for your taking me—for the burning of the post on the Poposia. We will make it even for everything. Run away, *M'sieu* Big Mike Menafee. We will know how to find you."

"Just don't give Max any trouble," Mike said, ignoring her bitterness. "Just make it as easy for him as yuh can. He's the best man in the camp, but he don't know the mountains—and you do."

MENAFEE carried no burden away from the forming camp in the lee of the granite facing. No extra clothing beyond a change of mittens and leggings. No weapon but a knife. He left quietly, without the knowledge of the men working frantically to build their fires higher and improve the wind-

breaks for themselves and the animals. And a rod from the fires he walked full into the fury of the storm again.

Next to the muscles of his thighs and legs, he thought his eyes were most important. He held to a deliberate, unhurried pace to ease his legs, and he slogged forward with his eyes closed, opening them only at brief intervals to check for obstacles within range of his foreshortened vision, and to measure the complexion of the storm.

He refused to permit himself to calculate the distance he had to travel or the time it would consume. He refused to think what the zenith of the storm would be when he finally reached the low saddle of the pass. He refused to speculate on whether Bridger and Fitzpatrick were encamped on the Green as yet or not. They should be. He knew this. And he clung to it.

The trick was to keep his mind absorbed without speculation on risks and chances. To do this, he made an arbitrary judgment of the distance he traveled between the intervals at which he opened his eyes. Fifty yards, he thought. Then, by counting these intervals and retaining the count in his mind, he could have some idea of how far he had traveled. He needed to know this, and the exercise kept his mind busy, occupied with a monotony which crowded out thought.

The wind was an enemy, jostling with tremendous strength. Although the snow was swept thin on this downslope, there was effort to breaking a trail and his feet were heavy, numb. The cold was so severe that the pain of breathing made him use only the shallow top segment of his lungs and it was exhausting to breathe—a constant quick pull for air and an equally quick exhalation.

The slant under his feet leveled after a time and the wind was at cyclonic force, driving each pellet of snow against him like a bullet. Then the way was downward and the wind eased a little, although he thought the cold was more intense. He had crossed the divide. He was through the pass.

Walking loosely, but still having to drive against the wind, even on this receding slope, Menafee tried to understand his motives for this attempt to penetrate this storm. The Big Company forces under Jim Beckwourth and Etienne Celeste had driven him into the attempt to cross the pass with his party. Luck had been bad and what had promised to be a spring squall had become a blizzard.

Every man in the mountains would understand how this could happen. There would be no criticism of Mike Menafee for this. With the kind of fall drifting on this wind, those in camp against the rock facing on the shoulder of the pass would be held immobile by their weakened animals, their own exhaustion, and the depth of the snow, even when the storm had subsided.

If the wind and snow stopped soon enough, they might be able to dig themselves out. If not, they would remain until somebody found their silent camp after the inevitable thaw. In this, also, there could be no element of blame for their captain.

Before now, weather and other enemies had prevented the arrival of a supply party at the summer rendezvous. Before now men had failed in the mountains and had retained the respect of their kind. In none of this could Menafee find the roots of the quiet determination which drove him doggedly on—which had driven him since the day he had left the Missouri with his mismatched and incompetent party of packers.

Loyalty to the old brigade, maybe. But loyalty was a huge word. It covered too much. Tony Celeste and her brother and Jim Beckwourth, with his Crows, were each of them being loyal, also, and in their way, to the same things. The mountains, the trade, and the men of the buckskin legion. Yet Beckwourth and the Celestes had driven his party into this storm.

Suddenly it did not seem so complicated. Suddenly Menafee saw that it had nothing to do with the mountains, with the fur trade, with the Big Company or the independents. It was some-

thing which could have occurred as easily on the river as here. It was merely that he had an abiding conviction of rightness, that Rocky Mountain's existence guaranteed the existence of the free trade and the men who had opened the mountains.

It was a conviction that a monopoly on the high rivers would destroy that which Ashley's men had opened up—the wide and rich frontier beyond the Missouri. A belief that the Big Company would control emigration when it had control of the fur trade. A certainty that this was wrong.

The mountains had been open to all when Ashley's brigade had first penetrated them. They should remain so. And for these convictions, Mike Menafee was willing to take these risks. He felt better for understanding.

A little later, he fell for the first time. The fall was not painful. A careless stumble, he thought. He slogged on, tripped over his own numbed feet two hundred yards beyond, and fell again. He landed hard, jarring his wind. He rose and moved forward once more.

As the wind eased, snow depth increased and he thought the fall became heavier. The temperature remained steady, a pervading void which dragged eagerly at body heat. In the next half an hour, Menafee was on his knees a dozen times.

At last he remained there, rocking back and forth a little, trying to ease the hammering in his chest and the rawness in this throat, trying to find somewhere the volition which seemed suddenly to have deserted him. He was not aware of Tony Celeste beside him until she spoke gently.

"Easy, now," she said. "I'll break trail for a while. You follow—easy. I've walked in your tracks. Now you walk in mine. We'll alternate. It is the only way to beat the devils of Two-go-tee."

It didn't seem strange to Mike that the girl should be there. He was not surprised that she had followed him. There had been many men in the camp on the shoulder of the pass and there are some things a woman fears more than death in the snow.

He thought this over for a moment, then shook the thought off. It wasn't fear which had brought this girl after him. It was the thing which he, himself, wanted. These were her mountains, also—the legacy of her two heritages. His belief that the mountains should remain open was hers, also. She knew Mike Menafee had to reach the Green, and why!

VI

THE LONG, slanting trail from the summit of South Pass to the floor of Bridger Basin was interminable. Tony Celeste's slender body was not long equal to the grueling task of breaking through the heavy, increasing fall of snow, but the brief respite the turn she took gave Menafee restored elasticity to his legs and steadied his breathing.

There was another rest period which both took wordlessly, during which she clung close to him for mutual warmth against the iciness of the dying wind. And presently it became apparent they were emerging on the perimeter of the storm. Survival became a certainty.

The day was almost done when they reached the Green and found a cairn at what Mike believed was the confluence of Horse Creek. More than an hour later they found another cairn three miles up the river, and the faint taste of smoke came down the wind to them.

Menafee held on until the red fires of a camp glowed ahead. He stopped, and gripped Tony Celeste by both arms. There was much he had to tell her before they went on into the camp ahead, for she would be returning at the end of the season to St. Louis and her family, to the circle of families on the river who were all Astor partners. If she understood this camp and the men within it, she could do a great service for the mountains when she returned to the river.

He wanted her to understand Gabe Bridger—already "Old Gabe," although he wasn't more than ten years older

than Menafee, himself. And Tom Fitzpatrick—"Broken Hand"—who had more friends among the mountain tribes than any man in the hills, white or red. And Milt Sublette and Gervais and Louis Vasquez. Men as savage, when aroused, as the storm behind them. Wild men, with a hatred of ink and paper and organization, who had banded together in the Rocky Mountain Fur Company because they believed Astor's combine would destroy the trade without competition, rather than in an effort to win profit, themselves. Reckless men, with the granite of greatness in them. Ashley's men. Kings of the Brotherhood.

He wanted her to understand because she could preach in her family, at least, that a working agreement between Astor partners and the independents, a partition of trade and cooperation, was a better solution for both sides than a trappers' war. She could preach the certain fact that not even an Astor partnership could destroy Jim Bridger and Broken Hand—and Big Mike Menafee.

But the fires were too close, their exhaustion and their need for comfort too great for words. He released the girl after a moment and they stumbled on into the fire-circle. Bridger's was the first shelter they reached. Old Gabe looked up curiously across a huge stewpot over a smokeless flame in the center of the shelter as they crawled through the skin-flapped doorway. He bounded to his feet an instant later.

"Mike, what in tarnation?"

"Snowed in—on the pass," Mike answered tersely.

Bridger kicked a cushion of robes closer to the fire and dipped two bowls into the big steaming pot. His eyes ran appraisingly over Tony Celeste's figure.

"Goods all right?" he asked.

"Were when we left," Mike said.

Bridger nodded, and his eyes went to the girl. "You get the dangedest luck, Mike," he said. "This kind of a storm catch anybody else on an open trail and they're fox-meat, right now. But not Menafee. Not only does he come into rendezvous through it like he's got a compass in his nose, but look what he picks up on the way."

"Picked her up on the Sweetwater," Mike said. "Etienne Celeste's sister. Tony, this is Jim Bridger."

The girl was drinking stew from the bowl Bridger had handed her. She blinked her eyes, but made no attempt to check her hunger for further acknowledgment.

"Food's short and it's cold on top, Jim," Mike said. "We've got to get back to the train."

"Sit," Bridger said. "I figgered there was some hurry. But not so much yuh can't feed. I'll rig us up a few boys and what mules ain't got one leg or the other froze off already. We'll be back with the train afore you and yore little pardner there have hit the bottom of that stewpot."

"I'm goin' back with yuh, Jim," Mike said.

"You crazy?" Bridger asked.

Tony Celeste dropped the bowl in her hands and seized Mike's arm. "No, Mike!" she cried. "You can't do it!"

"I've got to," Mike said stubbornly.

Bridger shrugged, speaking to Tony. "I knowed him quite a spell, miss," he said. "No use arguin' . . ."

Food and a brief rest in Bridger's shelter while Jim was making up the mule string for the return trip up the pass greatly eased Menafee's exhaustion. The night climb up the pass with the mules to pack trail after Bridger and Tom Fitzpatrick broke it, seemed almost ridiculously easy in comparison to the grinding labor of the downward trip with Tony Celeste.

AN HOUR after sunrise, the lead mules filed into the compact, snow-walled camp under the granite shoulder of the pass. Max Tugend and Menafee's river party were pinch-faced from twenty-four hours of battling fear and cold, but all were on their feet. Fires were built up and the combined party set about preparation of a big breakfast. Menafee found Tugend.

"Any sign of smoke, down canyon?" he asked.

"Where Beckwourth was caught?"

Tugend asked shrewdly. "No. I think they had to hunker down where they were, without wood. Think there'll be any of 'em left?"

"A mountain man takes a lot of killin', Max," Menafee answered, "even if he's wearin' Astor plaid. We're goin' to find out. Do it quiet, but pick out three or four of our best animals and get a little food on 'em. The two of us can do it alone, I think."

"Won't Bridger or Fitzpatrick go with us?" Tugend asked.

"We're not goin' to ask 'em."

Tugend shrugged and moved off. Menafee drifted slowly toward the lower edge of the camp. He was waiting there for Tugend to move the animals in this direction when Old Gabe and Broken Hand came up to him.

"Yuh didn't tell us the good luck in this storm, Mike," Bridger said with satisfaction. "Yuh didn't tell us Beckwourth and Etienne Celeste got caught in the same trap as you. Had to hear it from one of yore boys. They say there's been no sign of fire down the canyon. Even Beckwourth couldn't hold out too long without heat. Too bad, ain't it? Our competition from that brigade of Astor's ain't goin' to amount to much by the time we find 'em on our way out through the pass in midsummer."

"Tugend is riggin' some mules to go down into the canyon after 'em now," Mike said quietly. "I want the rest of yuh to wait here till we get back. We may need some help."

"Mike," Bridger said quietly, "you been in the high country long enough to know there ain't no soft spots in the mountains. We couldn't have had better luck if we'd cooked this storm up on purpose. Losin' the Sweetwater post and the brigade with Celeste and Beckwourth will set Astor's outfit back worse'n a full war with the Blackfeet. You an' Tugend ain't goin' down that canyon!"

Menafee looked at his two old friends. No one knew better than he did the iron in them, and their strength when they believed they were right.

"We're goin' to set Astor back, Jim," he said. "But we're goin' to do it at a palaver back at rendezvous, with Beckwourth and Celeste sittin' in on it—if they're still alive when I get down to 'em." He turned to Fitzpatrick. "Tom, I don't want either of yuh to try to stop me. There's only one way yuh can do it, and I don't think either one of yuh'd shoot a man in the back."

Turning, he slogged into the snow. He heard Bridger swear angrily. In a moment there were footsteps behind him. Old Gabe and Broken Hand were following his tracks, but they were making no attempt to overhaul him or restrain him. Behind them, Max Tugend was hazing three laden mules.

* * * * *

There had been one dead man in Beckwourth's miserable canyon camp and most of the company animals were dead. Every man in Beckwourth's Crow party had suffered from exposure. Both parties from the summit of the pass had been three days in the big rendezvous camp on the Green before Beckwourth felt up to palaver. And when it was called, he claimed the right to speak first, gesturing and posturing in Indian fashion.

"When I'm a string-halt old mosshorn," he began, "I'm goin' some place where the sun always shines. I'm goin' to find me some smart gent to write down what I've did in my life, and I'm givin' fair warnin', here and now, that I'm goin' to claim it was me that went over South Pass to Green River in that storm. That's the kind of thing that makes a man remembered! But I ain't cheatin' on Mike Menafee more than that. I doubt many of the rest of yuh would have moved a finger for my bacon after me signin' with Astor, but Mike did. I'm owin' to him, and I'll make any deal within reason with him in private afore I pull out of this rendezvous, to square the score."

Bridger rose. "We haven't told Mike this yet—me and Broken Hand and Milt and Gervais," he said, "but we've cut him a pardnership in Rocky Mountain Fur for bringin' us in his brigade of goods over the heads of Celeste and

you, Beckwourth. So that means we're all Old Brigade, pullin' together again. I would have treated yuh different, over on the pass, but Mike spilled the powder from my barrel. I'm not so unreasonable, now. We all got a right to the mountains. I propose we cut 'em up. If Big Company brigades will stay north of the Snake and the Yellowstone, we'll stay south. Next year we can rendezvous together again and talk boundaries."

THIS was the thing for which Mike Menafee had climbed the pass. It sounded good from Old Gabe's lips. He looked at Etienne Celeste. The trader rose.

"*M'sieu* Menafee has take care of the sister. The sister, I tell to you all, is a little devil. But *M'sieu* Menafee saw she was not hurt. I owe him something, too. I agree to the boundaries. I promise my family will agree. And my family is an important Astor partner."

Beckwourth stood up.

"It's a sly, arm-twistin' deal yuh're saddlin' us with, Gabe," he told Bridger. "I'd mebbe squeal or wish yuh a short drop to perdition if Menafee over there wasn't grinnin' so wide, admittin' he put yuh up to it without mebbe yuh even knowin' it. So we'll make the best we can out of it. If we traded south of the Yellowstone and the Snake, we'd have to build new posts. Reckon what we've got at Fort Union, Fort McKenzie, and Fort Boise will keep us busy enough. But I'm goin' to wear a sculping-knife to the palaver on boundaries at next year's rendezvous. Now, let's break this up. Me and Celeste and the Crows are movin' north in the mornin'. What kind of a rendezvous is it that don't have one night of ruckus-raisin' and a couple of drinks?"

Guffaws broke out and men stood up. Big Mike Menafee threaded the crowd about the palaver fire and moved across the camp toward his own shelter. There had been friendliness in this council when there could have been something else. He hoped it was an indication of other palavers between independents and big company men in the years to come. There was no way to know and it was enough now to be certain the trade was secure for another season.

Max Tugend followed Mike to the door of his shelter and grinned when he saw Tony Celeste fussing with the interior, already a perfection of orderliness.

"Me and the rest of the river boys have been making plans, sort of, Mike," Tugend said hesitantly. "We'd admire comin' back into the mountains again next year. We figger we'd do all right at it, too, if we could claim to be Menafee's men, then. Folks out this way would sort of know how big our shadows was if we could claim that."

Tony Celeste appeared in the door of the shelter.

"Does all the talking in the world have to be done in one night?" she inquired wickedly, waving her arms at Tugend. "Tomorrow—tomorrow. Save something to say tomorrow, can't you?"

Tugend grinned and backed away. Menafee stepped into the shelter. The girl turned to face him.

"Yuh'll be movin' northward with yore brother and Jim Beckwourth in the mornin', I reckon?" he asked.

Arms akimbo, the girl glared at him.

"Mike Menafee," she said, "maybe it is an all-right thing for the Beckwourth to write some day that he made our climb in the storm over South Pass. But do you want him to say, too, that he made a squaw of Tony Celeste?"

"This is a tradin' rendezvous," Mike said slyly. "And I heard yuh say once yuh didn't mix business and love."

"Business is over," Tony Celeste said softly. "The talking is finished, and didn't I drive away the last one with words on his lips?"

Bending forward, she caught the thong which held up the flap over the entrance to Mike's wickiup. The skin door dropped, blanketing out the fireground of the rendezvous, the strange admixture of men gathered in trade and fellowship there, and the whole of the long trail which had led westward from the Missouri to Green River and the heart of the mountains.

Johnny swung at Milligan with his smoking gun

CODE of the WEST

by Buck Billings

Foreman Johnny Meyers could never hit a lady, even when it was for her own good!

JOHNNY MEYERS knew the code as well as anyone. A gentleman did not lay violent hands on a lady. He did not even lay violent hands upon anyone else in her presence.

Just now the tough young foreman of the K9 Ranch was breathing hard and wishing he'd never heard of the code. He stood on the porch of the ranchhouse glaring at and being glared at by the beautiful and willful owner of said ranch, Ellen Roby.

"I wish we were kids again," Johnny said bitterly, opening and closing his big hands. "I'd pull yore hair. I'd turn yuh over my knee and paddle yuh where it'd do the most good."

He had an outthrust, pugnacious chin, this Johnny, and he looked like the capable kind of lad who was going places and no nonsense about it, either.

But his chin was matched by Ellen Roby's own determined jawline and she had coppery, short-cut hair in addition. Her eyes were bright and annoyed and amused all at once. And she was pretty

enough to interfere with Johnny's logical thought processes as she always did.

"I'm not interested in your childish yearnings," she told him coldly. "I'm running this ranch and as my foreman you'll take orders or you won't be my foreman. Now I'll tell you for the last time: I want that four hundred head rounded up, ready to be turned over to Milligan when he gets here!"

"And I'm tellin' you for the last time," Johnny said, gritting his teeth, "that yuh're strippin' the ranch! That's yore breeder stock. If yuh sell it off now yuh'll have scrubs in two years. If yuh hang on to it—"

"I've heard all this before!" she flared. "What good will it do me to hang on to the stock if we go under and lose the ranch? We've got to have money and that's the only way I know to raise some—by selling cattle!"

"I told yuh if it's money yuh want—"

"I heard you. And the answer is no! Now get out there and do your job or I'll send Slim to do it!"

When the green eyes began to shoot actual sparks, Johnny knew he had lost the argument. Long experience had taught him that.

"Darn a red-headed woman anyway," he muttered, stamping off to the bunkhouse.

THE punchers were there, waiting for orders. Though they were out of earshot of the battle, they could tell from the expressions and actions of the combatants how the tide of victory flowed, and they knew from Johnny's shuffling step and down-bent head exactly what had happened. Still, they waited, faces carefully expressionless.

"Slim," Johnny said stiffly, "round up the Herefords and hold 'em on the east pasture for Milligan. He's coming out today to look 'em over and buy 'em. . . . Wait a minute!" An idea began to percolate rapidly in Johnny's brain. "I'm goin' with yuh. Shore. I'm foreman and I'm responsible for this deal. Yep, reckon I'll just take charge."

There was a tight little grin on Johnny's snub-nosed, stubborn face. So you couldn't hit a lady, huh? Well, there was more than one way to butter your bread, if nobody minded his mixing a metaphor. Johnny was educated, too.

The line of working cowboys streamed out onto the east slope of the ranch and a longhorn cow, runty and wild, broke from the chaparral and crossed in front of them like a rabbit.

"There she goes—get her!" Johnny sang.

"Huh?" gulped Slim. "That's no Hereford!"

"Get her!" Johnny roared.

Startled, Slim wheeled his horse and shot after the cow, unrolling his rope as he went. The well-trained cowboys offered no further objections. In two hours of hard work they had rounded up every scrub and dogie on the ranch and had about a hundred and thirty of them herded on the east pasture. The cows were a sorry looking bunch, the culls and runts of the ranch, the last of the old herds which Johnny was systematically weeding out in his upbreeding program.

The foreman sat his horse and looked out over the herd.

"Pretty a bunch of Herefords as I ever seen," he announced with satisfaction. "Milligan ought to be tickled to death with these."

Slim removed his sombrero to scratch his head, loking first at the scrubs, then at the foreman. Then, deciding he didn't want to be anti-social about it, he sighed and agreed.

"Yep, mighty purty bunch of cows. Grade A stock, every one." The thought was suddenly too much for him and he turned away, choking.

But Johnny was in no mood for laughing. He was brooding now, thinking of Milligan, whom he considered worse than a bandit, and of Ellen Roby. Milligan had made money by just such propositions as this—catching a hard-pressed rancher and buying up choice cattle at starvation prices. It was good business, to be sure. But it had ruined more than one man and caused one Johnny knew to blow out his brains

with a .45. Very messy. There were businessmen, Johnny thought, who should wear a mask and carry a gun. And Milligan was one of these.

Slim nudged him out of his reverie. "Boss comin'," the puncher announced, his eyes lighting up with anticipation.

The other punchers pricked up their ears and looked disinterested. They could hardly wait for Ellen to arrive. What would she say when she saw this magnificent collection of scrubs? All past battles would pale into nothing compared with her explosion at this.

But Johnny disappointed them. He put spurs to his horse and galloped to meet Ellen as she came down off the open, wooded, park-like ridge.

Johnny waited for her in the first fringe of timber. As her horse rocketed by, he spurred out and dabbed his loop neatly over her arms and yanked it tight.

Something almost like a little choked scream came out of Ellen's throat and she brought her horse to a stop with her knees. Johnny held the loop tight, pinning her arms, and came alongside.

"Are you crazy?" Ellen demanded hotly. "I'm not in the mood for practical jokes hight now, Johnny. Take this rope off.'

Johnny flipped another loop around her arms, pinning them even tighter. He took a clean handkerchief out of his pocket and tied it around her mouth, shutting off her angry words.

Then he took his piggin' string and tied her wrists behind her back so he could remove his rope, which he coiled and restored to his saddle.

"Now we'll wait," he said.

Angry, sputtering sounds came from Ellen, but no recognizable words. She writhed and twisted and came near falling out of her saddle, but Johnny was a roper and she could not budge his knots.

"Be a good girl," Johnny said.

He peered out into the flat. He'd been barely in time. The herd was still out there, with Slim and the boys keeping it bunched, and now the giant figure of Milligan was riding across the grass toward them.

MILLIGAN was a huge man, with rocklike craggy features. His gods were money and money, and if there was something he wouldn't do for money it hadn't been yet discovered. He was also a hard and tough cowboy who had fought his way up from nothing to a position of affluence and he was afraid of nothing.

Johnny could hear his outraged bellow drift clear across the prairie as he took in the sorry herd of scrubs which had been assembled for him. Then he wheeled his big horse and went galloping off at an angle towards the K9 ranchhouse.

Johnny watched him plunge into the timber and disappear.

"That does it," he said. "Now I've got to talk to him and put the finishin' touches on the proposition. But meanwhile where do I cache you, Redhead?"

Redhead gave him a look that should have melted him down into slag and that promised dire things when she got loose. He took her horse's bridle and started deeper into the timber. They didn't get far.

There was a sudden rush and thunder of hoofs and Milligan was upon them. No fool, Milligan had cut Ellen's trail from the ranchhouse, turned and tracked her back toward the herd.

The big man yanked his gun and sent a shot smashing close to Johnny's head. Reflex action made Johnny draw and fire all in one, but the shot went wild.

"Look out, yuh blamed fool!" Johnny yelled, fearful that another shot might hit the girl.

But there was no time for more. At their combined speeds, both horses were together in a moment, meeting at an angle with a crash. Johnny swung instantly at Milligan's big head with his smoking gun. Milligan pulled trigger again and the blast scorched Johnny's side and laid a red-hot poker against his skin.

In the sudden reaction from pain he laid hold of Milligan and dragged the

big man out of the saddle. They rolled on the ground while hoofs lashed all about them as both frantic horses struggled madly to get clear and not step on the men.

Blazing pain had Johnny's side on fire and his left arm seemed to have no strength. Milligan mauled him like a huge grizzly bear, growling all the while. Johnny swung his gun barrel, chopping down at the other man's head in short, swift stabs. Some of them connected and made Milligan grunt with pain. He pulled trigger again and the blast of burning powder roared.

Then Johnny's gun-barrel connected solidly and Milligan's bearlike arms weakened. The foreman swung again and again with the strength of desperation. It took three more blows to do the job. But the big man went lax at last and sagged out flat on the ground, his eyes glazed and the gun sliding from his hand.

Johnny staggered to his feet, feeling slightly more dead than alive. His shirt was in ribbons and practically on fire. He had a groove across his ribs from which blood was running down into his levis and boot, his chest felt as if it had been caved in and, worst of all, he felt like a complete fool. His stunt had backfired with a vengeance.

Staggering a little, he went to the girl and freed her hands. He was a little slower about taking the gag from her mouth. He wasn't anxious to hear what she was going to say. He would have enough trouble with Milligan when that tough character came back to life, without worrying about Ellen Roby's tongue.

A rush and clatter of hoofs announced the arrival of "Slim" and the other boys as Johnny took off the gag and hastily stuffed it into his pocket.

"Johnny!" Slim gasped. "You hurt? We heard shots! Yuh had a fight with Milligan?"

Johnny's eyes went to Ellen, but she said nothing, waiting.

"I guess it was a stupid kind of trick," Johnny said, more to Ellen than Slim. "I'm sorry." He raised his eyes to the girl's face. "Did yuh see the cows?"

"I saw them from the edge of the timber," she replied.

Johnny lifted his hands in admission of defeat. "I only thought if I could keep Milligan from gettin' our breeders, persuaded yuh to take the money yuh need . . . Shucks, Ellen, what am I savin' for? I couldn't find no better use—" His voice died away.

THE waiting cowboys saw no explosion building up in her eyes. There was even a tiny smile on her red lips as as she looked down at the crushed figure of her bumptious foreman. "How did you expect to get away with it, Johnny?" she asked. "You know—the code?"

"Never lay hands on a woman?" Johnny shrugged. "Well, yuh see, if a passel of citizens waited on me with the tar and feathers, I figgered I'd explain to 'em that you was a heap sight more tomboy than lady anyways!"

There was a dreadful silence for a moment, the silence before a storm. Then a cowboy snickered, gasped, and coughed violently. Ellen turned and quelled them with a look.

"Milligan's coming to," she said. "Slim, you and the boys take care of him, put him on his horse and start him for town. Tell him I've changed my mind about selling him the Herefords. Tell him my partner, Johnny Meyers, is putting new capital into the business."

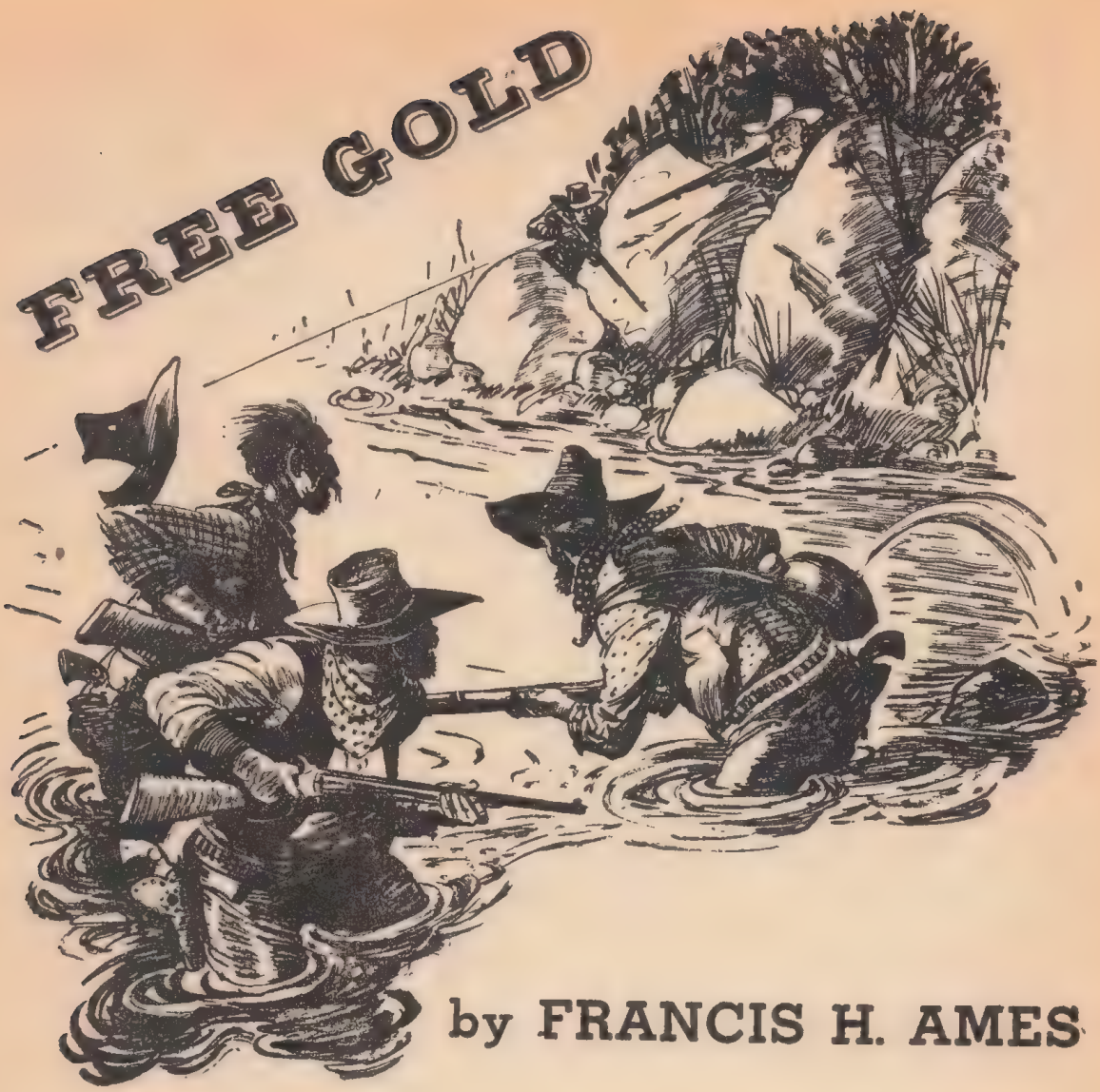
The smile transformed her from a tomboy into a beautiful woman. And it grew and became inexplicably tender as she saw the great happy light dawn in Johnny Meyer's eyes.

"Yuh mean it?" he gasped.

"I mean it." She slid down from her horse and put her arm around him. "We've got to take care of that wound, Johnny. And if Milligan prefers any charges with the sheriff—why, he must be losing his mind if he thought he saw me tied up. Except, maybe tied up for life."

And somehow it took both her arms to support Johnny properly, and the puncher was glad to cooperate.

FREE GOLD



by FRANCIS H. AMES

Relentlessly, outlaws track down Steve Spence and an old prospector to the hidden diggings!

STEVE SPENCE, late of Montana, young but not carefree, walked down deserted Front Street, in the gold rush town of Sacramento. Although it was late spring, the clammy tule mist rose from the nearby Sacramento River with marrow chilling effect. The cowboy was mentally booting himself for being fool enough to come to this land of rumored rich gold diggings, when he saw the lean arm reach out of the dark alley and twitch the old man from view.

He moved with the instant reaction of a man who has lived where only the quick survive, hurtling his six-foot frame around the alley corner in a lunging run.

He could make out three struggling figures, dimly outlined against the feeble light of the next street. A shrill voice rose above the scuffle.

"Take thet, you skinny garter snake! I'll teach you to monkey with old Sam Knobbs!"

A blackjack rose in the air over the

old fellow's head. Steve catapulted into the fracas, landing a solid punch on one of the thug's heads. The man staggered off balance, and the young hairpin whirled to drive the other back to the alley wall with short, stiff body blows. The man dropped to his knees with a grunt of pain, scooted between Steve's legs, and both men took to their heels.

Spence charged in pursuit with the older man pounding along behind. They emerged into the dim street, to stop and peer in both directions. Their quarry had vanished from sight.

"Bah," snorted the old fellow. "Alley rats! They've slid in their holes."

Spence grinned at the old fellow, noting the heavy frame, the work gnarled hands, and the weather beaten face. He stood there now, with his gray beard outthrust belligerently on his bony chin, his pale blue eyes peering from beneath bushy brows with the fierceness of an eagle.

"Hah," he snorted with satisfaction. "You and me shore made them gents take to their heels pronto. I ain't so spry as I used to be, but I'd had 'em both by their snoots in another minute."

Turning to the younger man, he thrust out a horny hand.

"Thanks," he said. "Let's you and me go get us a cup of hot java, while I thanks you proper."

THE meal over, Steve Spence lighted a quirlie and leaned back with a sigh of content.

"Where you from, son, and what's yore handle?"

"Montana," said Steve, "and wishin' I was back there. I come here to get rich diggin' gold. Guess I come too late. I find all the diggings worked out and Chinamen going over the remains."

"I knowed it—I knowed it," crowed the oldster. "I spotted you fer a Montanny man right off—right from my range."

"But you're not a cattleman, Sam, you look like a miner to me."

"There you go, there you go," complained Knobbs. "I looks like a miner, and I is. Every snake in the grass in town sees a pick and shovel in my hair —that's how come I'm still in town with my burro eatin' his head off at my shack down by the river. But I've seed the cactus bloomin' on the alkali flats and the blizzards blowin', and don't think I ain't, even if it was a few years back."

"How come looking like a miner keeps you in town, old man?"

"Why," the oldster replied, "the rich diggin's is all worked out, but there's a lot of hoot-owl rannies that think us old-timers has a few places hid away. They watches us like cats."

He stopped to chuckle in his beard. "That's the way they figger, and maybe they is right, but they ain't follerin' old Sam out to his diggin's and fillin' him full of lead. Not old Sam."

He stopped abruptly to peer piercingly at the youngster across the table. *"Hmmm,"* he breathed. "A right limber young gent from Montanny. How's about you and me sashayin' down to my shack and pow-wowin' fer awhile —we might get together on somethin'?"

"Fine," said Steve, rising from the table. . . .

The heavily laden burro picked its way daintily along the steep trail that looped down to the American River hundreds of feet below. Sam Knobbs lead the way and Steve Spence followed, a forty-four strapped to his lean thigh and a Winchester carbine cradled in the crook of his arm.

Looking down, over rough terrain sprinkled with evergreen, scrub oak, and manzanita, the silver thread of the river could be seen, with white water ruffling its surface in the bright sunshine. Towering up from the opposite bank, a rugged mountain led away to where the Sierra summit rose, snow tipped and serrated in the distance.

Sam paused to wave a snarled hand. "That's the Iowa Hill country son. The Forty Niners took millions in red metal out'n them hills."

"Yeah," drawled Spence, stopping to shake pine needles from his open throated shirt, "but is there any left. I could use some of that stuff right now."

(Continued on Page 145)

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A Book Bargain ROUNDUP

by TEX MUMFORD

FICTION and literature of the West happens to be our particular hobby. For those who are like-minded we have taken a ride over the Western book range and selected the richest graze. Below are some of the choice feeding spots for Western fiction fans, now on sale or about to be issued. Look for them among the current 25c reprint crop on your favorite newsstand.

POPULAR BOOK OF WESTERN STORIES Edited by Leo Margulies

Here are some of the finest works of many of our favorite authors, between one set of covers. Mr. Margulies, one of the leading editors of Westerns in the country, has been an enthusiastic collector of Westiana most of his life. No one is better qualified to make such a selection as the current volume.

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THUNDER IN THE DUST by Alan Le May

California Baja is a land of sand, mystery and lonesomeness—but it is also a land of romantic promise that is ever tempting to the adventurous. Tom Cloud is one of the adventurous.

In *Thunder In The Dust,* Cloud leaves his Wyoming ranch and dares so largely in the new land of the far Southwest that his complete downfall is barely averted by his outrageous courage. And under the drumbeat of grand action in this novel there runs the story of a love that is deep and strong.

THE FLYING U STRIKES by B. M. Bower

"Go West, young man," was the much quoted advice of a few generations ago. It is still good advice; but whether you are young or old, man or woman, you can go West without ever leaving the comfort of your home. For to read one of the famous "Flying U" books by that beloved ranch woman, B. M. Bower, is literally to be transported without effort directly into the life of the cow-country. If you've ever wanted to live on a ranch, here is your chance to participate in the fun and frolic and the daily work, as well as in the dangers and hardships of rangeland living. B. M. Bower's characters are folks, real cow-country folks. They need no boost for those who have met them before. Those who haven't—we know you'll like 'em, heaps.

THE SILVER STAR by Jackson Gregory

For those who like plenty of gun-action and hard riding in their Westerns this novel in which honest old Steve Cody is no sooner elected sheriff as the ranchers' final defiance of an outfit of ruthless depredators, than his reckless, hell-for-leather son horns in and almost gives the county heart failure before they find out which side is meant to benefit from the gun-magic of his sure and sudden-jumping six. Jackson Gregory's army of fight-famished followers will find a continuance of his punch-packed performance in *The Silver Star.*

FREE GOLD

(Continued from page 142)

Sam nodded. "Sure. Plenty left."

"How come?" Spence asked, "that you picked me to go along to your diggings? I'm a pilgrim at this gold mining game."

Sam chuckled. "Like I told you afore, I come here every year to get my winter stake. Last year three rannies follered me in and stole my best burro—I had to leave without washin' out a pan fer fear they'd locate my diggin's. I didn't figger on goin' in alone this year. Dang near got the gallopin' willies waitin' for some hairpin I could trust to show up.

"Oh, I ain't doin' you no favor, son," he went on hastily. "I'm simple warshin' yore back while you warshes mine. We ain't no Sunday school picnic, you know. You may have to grow short horns and a stiff neck afore you're through with this party. Chances are, them sidewinders is sneakin' along our back trail right now."

"Nice," said Steve. "Plumb nice! Do I dare lay me down to sleep tonight?"

"Maybe," the oldster said speculatively, looking back along the trail. "Maybe."

"Bosh," Steve burst out. "You're an old granny, mister. They ain't nothin' in this upside down country but jaybirds and rattlesnakes."

INSTANTLY the aged prospector gave a ludicrous side jump and glanced apprehensively around. "Rattlesnakes!" ejaculated the old man. "You ain't seen none of them critters has you, Steve? Them poisonous reptiles give me the willies.

"No, I ain't seen none," Steve said laughingly. "But what makes you think we're being followed? I think yore imagining things."

"Imagining things, am I?" crowed Sam indignantly, "Well, let me tell you somethin', son, and don't say I didn't warn you. If you want that gold to

[*Turn page*]

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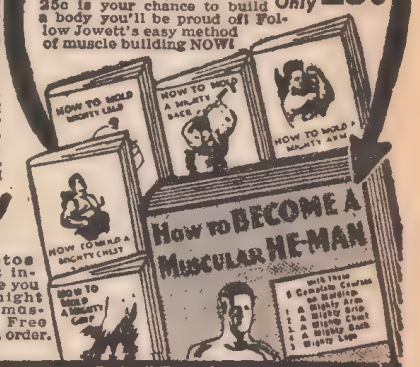

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send back to Montanny for that Rose gal of yores, you better listen real close to what old Sam sez, and keep that cutter loose in the holster."

As the burro moved down towards the river, hump backed and braced against the steep terrain, Steve thought of Rose Fenton and his promise to her. Bitter over the loss of his few cattle in a winter blizzard, he had postponed their wedding, and, lured to this land of rich promise, he had left her waiting for him to send for her.

"Honey," he had told her, "I'll make us a home where the blizzards don't blow. Then I'll send for you. I promise you that it won't be long."

He grimaced as he thought of how green he had been. Flat broke when the old man had picked him up, and now on a wild goose chase in which he had no faith. He liked the old fellow—he liked him immensely—but he thought that he was an old fraud with an imaginary mine. A rainbow chaser. But what if he was— He himself was just that.

There was no doubt but what Sam Knobbs was an old-timer. He fitted into the mountains like an expensive glove on a woman's hand. Except for his fear of snakes, he was as much at home on the trail as the deer themselves. When Steve kidded him about this, he made no attempt to hide his one weakness.

"I've run into plenty of them crawlin' critters," he said, "in my time, but the good Lord fixed it up in the Garden of Eden so any feller with good sense would shy off from them sneakin' jaspers. I'd druther have Spike Sims and his side kicks on my trail any time, I shore would."

Reaching the river, they selected a long diagonal riffle and crossed without incident. The canyon closed in above and below, too steep to climb.

"Only crossin' within miles," Sam said. "I been here afore."

They climbed the steep hill on the other side and descended into a shaded grassy swale. Steve was grateful for the rest as they pulled to a halt.

"Now," said the oldster, his face alight with eagerness," I gets back at them owl-hoot critters."

"Get back at what owl-hoot critters?" Steve echoed, looking around at the empty hills.

"Trouble with you youngsters is that you has to be showed," Sam said sadly. "Well, I used to be thataway myself. I'm goin' to sneak back to the river and ketch the sidewinders who's follerin' us and beat their brain plumb out."

Steve looked at his partner suspiciously. He began to think the man was slightly daft.

"There ain't anyone follering us. What makes you think so?"

"Why shouldn't Spike Sims and them two sidewinders of his foller us. They been watchin' me all winter, and they follered me in last year, didn't they?"

"But with a rifle at that river, you could hold an army back!" Steve protested. You didn't need me along."

"Shore, shore, I could hold a army back. But I can't stand there and shoot a man down in cold blood from the brush while he's standin' thigh deep in water, and I can't stay there and hold 'em back and go about my business either."

Steve decided to humor him.

"All right," he said. "There's men following us. What do we do? Do I hold them back all summer while you go on and pan gold?"

"Shucks, no!" snorted the oldster." "This time we captures the whole works, dumps their outfit in the river. When they has to go back for more grub and such, we plumb disappears." He slapped his thigh and cackled with glee.

"Fine," said Steve, "Let's go."

LEAVING the burro contentedly grazing, they returned, sneaking from rock to rock, and from bush to bush, until they were hidden in the brush at the water's edge. They remained there, silent and alert, as the sun rode down on the rim and began to throw shadows on the near shore. Then Steve saw a movement in the brush high

up on the trail.

"Didn't I tell you!" Sam whispered. "There the ornery jaspers come. Careful now, don't move! They'll come right on, figgerin' I've shoved on tryin' to throw 'em off the trail like I did last year. This time, we'll fool 'em."

The party issued from the brush and started boldly across. There were three men and a lightly loaded burro. One man was tall and thin, wearing a black sombrero and with a wide cartridge belt slung around his thin hips. The other two were short and heavy set. One man paused to remove his hat and mop his brow with a red bandanna. His bald head shone in the light.

"Maybe they're just another prospecting party, Steve whispered. "How do you know they're following us?"

"I know all right," the old man said grimly, his pale eyes fixed on the men with grim intent. "When they get close, foller my lead, son, foller my lead."

The party was within fifty yards of the shore, splashing along knee deep in the fast water with the burro following behind, when Sam raised his carbine and sent a shot into the water at their feet.

"Stop where you are, you rattlers," be bellowed, "and drop yore guns, a'fore I blows out your gizzards."

The men halted, their rifles at hip, the black muzzles swinging as they searched the brush.

"Drop them guns, Spike Sims. I'm not alone this time. Drop the six-shooters, too."

As he spoke, the old man fired again, and the hat flew from the tall, black haired man's head, as though whipped off by a giant hand. Steve, taking his cue from the old fellow, sent a shot between one of the other men's legs, and levering in a cartridge, neatly drilled the canteen on the bald headed man's hip.

"That'a boy," chortled Sam. "Drop 'em you hoot-owls! Drop 'em."

Guns flew in every direction as the hombre's shucked them in frantic haste

[*Turn page*]

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—hot lead was flying too close. The burro took flight and went floundering back towards the other shore.

"Whoooee," called Sam. "Whoooee."

The burro stopped in mid stride, threw up it's head and pointed it's long, laughable ears in their direction—then it started back eagerly.

"That's what you get, Spike," Sam yelped in glee, "fer runnin' yore outfit with my burro. Next time you steal a feller's donkey, fix the critter up so he can't hear."

The burro came to shore and started to where they were hidden in the thick brush.

"Now," ordered Sam, stepping out in view, and holding his rifle leveled at full cock, "make tracks! The last feller on the other side, gets a slug whinin' along on his rear. Without shootin' irons, grub, or blankets, I guess you gents won't foller old Sam on this trip.

"Get goin'!" he shouted, sending another bullet singing over the water.

The trio fled, frantically stumbling over the rocky bottom, and falling to rise drenched as muskrats, as the old man levered his carbine and sent slugs singing about their ears. As they reached the far shore, the tall man turned and shook his fist.

"Next time, you old fool, it'll be our turn. You'll pay for this." With this parting remark, they disappeared from view.

The burro rubbed its soft nose along Sam's wrinkled face; he rubbed it's long ears and crooned to the homely beast.

"Glad to get back with old Sam, ain't you feller?"

Turning to the younger man, he said, "We'd better shake a leg, we'll travel yet tonight."

IT WAS three long days later that Sam Knobbs stood with his young partner, shielded by brush, and pointed to the dark blue smear that lay half way up an almost perpendicular cliff. The smear was half round in shape and lay clearly outlined in the light brown earth

of the cliff face. The three days had been spent in traveling over some of the roughest terrain Steve had ever encountered. He marveled at the endurance the old man showed, and was himself so tired that he ached for a rest.

"That there blue spot is an old river channel." Sam told Steve. "It was flung up there on top of the mountain when the Lord heaved this old world around. What yore lookin' at, is an old hydraulic washing operation that they worked years ago until it petered out to where it didn't pay with the poor equipment they had then."

"And I suppose," said Steve sarcastically, "that our shovels and gold pans, are more modern equipment than those fellers had? Besides, how do we stand on the side of that cliff while we pan gold?

"I may not know this God-forsaken country," he went on, "but if you haven't been leading me on a wild goose chase the last three days, I'll eat my Stetson. Looks to me like we ain't more'n two miles from where we started after we run them gents across the river."

The old man leered at him with a twinkle in his eye. "Might have knowed," he said, "that I couldn't fool a Montanny feller. We ain't more'n three mile, fer a fact; the river's a mile below. I laid a plain trail off north and then circled back over the rim rocks where we wouldn't leave no trail. I don't figger them sidewinders'ull come back this year, cause they know old Sam is sly as a fox, but I ain't takin' no chances."

"But why all this secrecy?" Steve wanted to know, "Every miner in this country must know about these old workings."

"Shore they does!" Knobbs grinned mysteriously. "But they'd give their right eye to know where old Sam gets his gold, too.

"Let's make camp and get some shuteye," he went on. "We really go to work in the mornin'. I'm anxious to see that

[*Turn page*]

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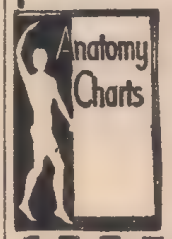

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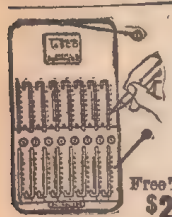

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yeller dust in the pan."

Steve lay awake late that night, looking up at the stars as they twinkled high over the mountain ranges. He thought of his sweetheart, Rose Fenton, waiting for him and watching the mail for letters that he could not send and he wondered what the morning would bring. When he finally dropped off to sleep, it did not seem like a moment until Knobbs was shaking him awake.

"Rise and shine, youngster," Knobbs yelled. "The coffee's boilin' in the pot."

The secret of the old man's gold was revealed that day. The hydraulic washings, that had eaten away the whole face of the cliff and hundreds of feet of the blue gravel river bed, had taken the nuggets and rough gold, but the dust and fine gold had escaped down into the little creek below which led to the American River. Washed by the spring melting snows, much of the precious metal had gone down to the larger stream, where it had furnished a small gold rush of it's own.

The miners had worked this little creek too, but after the first cream was skimmed, it hardly paid wages. Sam had been in on that skimming and had noted the sudden decrease in color below a certain point.

Crafty old-timer that he was, he had come back long after the little creek had been considered cleaned out and located the fault in its bed that had caught and held much of the precious metal. Dust, fine gold, and even occassional wire gold and nuggets that had escaped the hydraulic men in the workings above.

TOGETHER, working stripped to the skin in the hot sun, the two men had built a small dam to turn the creek, which was now at its summer low. Then wielding picks and shovels, they laboriously cleaned out the muck to work down into the fault. Steve panted that night when he saw his first string of rich color in the pan, but as the weeks flew by, it became just a job of hard work with pan, shovel, and sluice-box.

Each day they rose with the brassy sun flooding over the rim of the Sierra range, and worked until it sank below the western hills. He took satisfaction as the leather pokes filled out like plump sausages, and grew in number.

Their camp life fell into a pattern, with the oldster doing the cooking and Sam chopping the fuel and cleaning up after the hasty meals. One thing the old man insisted on, was hiding each poke as it filled. He built a small box to contain them and went up the hill side and came back without it. As each new poke filled he took it up and returned empty handed. Each time he was gone for some time, and each time he managed to let Steve understand, without actually saying so, that he wanted to go alone.

An older man or one with less pride than Steve Spence, would have demanded to know. There had never been any understanding between the two men as to what share each would receive, and it was Sam Knobbs' mine. In spite of himself, the youngster began to build up doubts concerning his partner. The gold meant little to him, save for its value in keeping his promise to Rose. But what did he really know about the old man. How easily he could gun his partner down when the work was done and move out with the gold. If he didn't intend to do something like this, why did he keep its hiding place a deep secret?

Looking back at their days on the trail together, a warm feeling of friendliness for the old codger would come over him, but the suspicions insisted on creeping back into his mind. He found himself warily watching Knobbs' every move and noticed Knobbs' gun was never far from his hand. Accordingly, Spence kept his own weapons within easy reach.

As the days wore on, tension between the two built up, and they grew less companionable. Still, Spence could not bring himself to follow the old man, and spy on him when he went to hide the pokes.

[*Turn page*]

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"We've got to move on, son," the old man said, "unless we want to try to live on wild game. I don't hanker to do no high-powered shootin' around the diggin's—might attract some wanderin' jasper's attention."

"Why don't we file on this claim?" Steve asked. "You were afraid to do it openly alone, but the two of us could do it safely."

"Maybe we could," Knobbs said thoughtfully. "It'd pay off rich for a few seasons, then the pocket would peter out. What do you say that we cover up the diggin's and pull out come mornin'?"

"Suits me," Steve said shortly.

That night, as he lay in his blankets, he did not go to sleep. His gun lay under the covers, and his hand never far away. If the old man was going to do him harm, this would be the time. Still he might want his help to get the two burros out and to help meet any hazards of the trail. He berated himself for his suspicions, but they persisted, and he did not sleep that night.

As they ate breakfast the next morning Steve's suspicions increased. As they sat on the crude benches, eating from the plank table, Sam Knobbs laid his heavy revolver on the table near his hand. He seemed nervous and glanced frequently around. Steve had a tin of coffee raised to his lips and was regarding his partner over it, suspicion dark in his eyes, when the harsh voice spoke from behind a nearby boulder:

"Keep those hands in sight, we've got you covered."

The two men at the table froze like statues, Steve with his cup still to his lips and Sam with his hand half reaching for the Colt. There was a rustling in the brush and the three men whom they had chased over the river walked up, guns leveled.

Old Sam Knobbs' face paled but no muscle quivered as he spoke.

"I been smellin' skunks in the brush all mornin'. I felt 'em in my bones."

STEVE sat there while his golden world toppled about his ears. The tall black-haired man, black whiskered also now, stood spraddlelegged before them, his ugly face alight with triumph. The bald headed man took his stand on one side and the short stocky man on the other side.

"Thought you could fool us, didn't you Sam," Sims jeered, "with that blind trail over the mountain. You forgot the dirt water from yore sluice box comin' down the river."

"Yah," said the old man, "I didn't forget. I hope you fellers had a pleasant walk."

Sims' unpleasant face reddened with anger.

"Yuh're awful smart, ain't you Sam. Well now you'll do the walkin'. First you'll walk to where you've got your pokes catched, then you and your partner here'ull see if you kin walk in the river with holes in your carcasses."

There was no doubting that the man would do as he said. Steve felt raw panic surge up in his throat. He tensed himself to go for his gun, but the old man stopped him with a warning glance.

"Don't be a fool," he muttered. "These side-winders would shoot you down like a dog."

"Search 'em for iron, men," Spike ordered.

The heavy set, half bald jasper, with tobacco-stained chin, did the searching as the other two kept them covered. He removed a long, wicked-looking knife from a hidden sheath in Sam's clothes. Steve wondered if this was the instrument that the old geezer had intended to use on him. The six-guns and rifles were tossed back in the brush.

"Now, I'll give you ten seconds to show us where those pokes are hid," said Sims grimly.

"Aw, heck," said Sam. "We worked our tails off and didn't get nothin'. You fellers know this crick's worked out as well as I do."

The gold pan lay by the stream where the two men had just cleaned out the

[*Turn page*]

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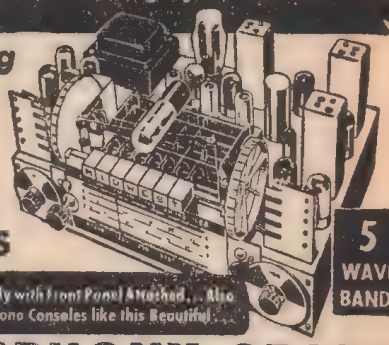

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riffles from the sluice box.

"Pan that out, Shorty," ordered Sims, "and we'll see."

The short man was an expert with the pan, agitating it below the surface, and raising it to swirl away the residue. The outlaws leaned over to catch the gleam of dust and fine gold laying a string across the bend of the pan's bottom.

"My stars!" breathed Baldy. "The old codger must have a couple hundred ounces hid away, long as they've been workin' here."

Sims spun around, the bore of the Colt centered on the old man's chest. The hammer clicked back with an ominous sound.

"Lead us to it, Knobbs," he rasped. "Build a fire boys. If the old fool don't talk, we'll burn his feet off."

"What about his greenhorn partner, here?" the bald headed man asked. "He might talk easier than the old jasper."

"No, he won't!" exploded Knobbs, half rising to his feet. "My partner don't know where it's hid. Don't make no difference what happens to an old coot like me, but this kid's got a gal waitin' fer him up in Montanny. I figgered you horny toads might be along, so I never let him know where I hid the stuff."

"So that's it, eh," sneered Sims. "Goin' soft in yore old age, ain't you Sam." He swung his eyes toward Baldy. "Use the fire on the kid. The old sourdough'll talk then."

Baldy grabbed up a burning brand and approached Steve, his bleary eyes alight with anticipation. Steve shrank back from it.

"Stand back, you fool," bellowed Knobbs. "I know you skunks well enough to figger you'll go through with it. Turn the kid loose with grub, and I'll lead you to the cache."

Sims fixed the old man with a cold menacing stare.

"All right Sam, lead the way," he said softly. "You have my word on it."

As his partner rose to his feet with the short man punching a gun in his back, Steve spoke up.

"His word ain't worth a hoot. They'll kill us both as soon as you show them the gold."

Sam looked a long moment at Steve, then led the way up the hillside, the three outlaws walking behind. Steve thought then of Rose—wondering what she would think as the years passed and no letter came.

Sam led the way up to a flat where he had gone each night, and where Steve had never been. Steve only knew that the gold was buried somewhere here, in the box the old codger had built.

KNOBBS halted before a low hung bush that swept the ground. Beneath it were scattered leaves.

"There's a box under those leaves," Sam said. "The gold is in it—over two hundred ounces."

"Keep 'em covered, boys!" exclaimed Sims, as he eagerly went forward and knelt to sweep away the leaves, to expose the box. It sat flush with the ground, the cover held closed by a leather throng. The low hanging bush impeded his anxious hands and he tried to sweep it aside impatiently. He dug his hands under the lid and raised it up, thrusting his arm quickly into the box.

"Watch it, son!" warned Sam.

Things happened fast then. Sims leaped back with a scream of terror that echoed over the hills. Attached to his wrist was an enormous rattlesnake which threw its rattle-free tail around his arm with a writhing motion.

The two outlaws leaped back in horror. Steve, taking quick advantage of the diversion, whirled around and drove his fist into the short man's face with all his power. He wrenched the Colt from the owl-hoot's hand as it exploded, burning his palm with powder. Knobbs grappled with the bald man, while Sims ran shrieking around the flat, trying to throw off the threshing snake.

Steve drove into his man with short, piston-like blows which sent him to his knees. As he pawed to rise, the cowboy

[*Turn page*]

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caught him flush on the chin with a stiff uppercut. He went down like a log.

Spence whirled just as the bald man hit Sam between the eyes with his gun barrel and the old fellow went down. Spence leaped on the bald-headed jasper's back, driving one knee between his shoulders.

Cupping two powerful hands, hardened by weeks of shovel work, under the man's chin, he heaved back. There was a sickening crack as the outlaw's neck gave way.

Steve dropped the man like a limp rag, and whirled to face Sims, who stood now a few feet away, his face drained of all color, his six-gun trained on the youngster.

"It's you and me now," Sims snarled. "I hold the trump card!"

Spence saw the man's finger tighten on the trigger.

"Hold it, you fool," he snapped. "Press that trigger and you're a dead man. The rest are dead. I'm a doctor. Without my help you'll die within the hour. Those big rattlers kill fast."

Sims looked fearfully about and the gun wavered.

"They ain't all dead," he whispered hollowly. "Yuh're lyin'.

"You idiot!" Spence retorted. "Can't you see Sam's skull is caved in, and the man on top of him has a broken neck. I slipped a knife between the other gent's ribs—his own knife."

As the tall man stood there unbelieving, Steve moved forward.

"Drop that gun, Sims," he snapped. "Every minute counts if you want to live."

"Stand back," Sims shouted, foam showing at his lips.

Cold-eyed, the youngster from Montana walked toward the man, with slow, evenly spaced steps—his hand outstretched for the Colt.

The tall outlaw stood there hesitating, stark panic written on his evil face. The Colt steadied and his finger whitened with the pull—then the man broke.

As he dropped the weapon, he

grasped his bitten wrist at the base.

"For God's sake, do something!" he gasped hoarsely. "Before it kills me."

"That'a boy," yelped Sam Knobbs, coming to his feet, and scooping up the fallen Colt. "I wuz layin' doggo, when I seed what yore game was." He wiped the blood from a cut on his forehead.

The tall outlaw sank to the ground moaning as Steve knelt to examine the bitten wrist.

Knobbs asked, "You ain't no sure enough doctor, are you, son?"

"No," said Steve soberly. "I'm not. But no sure enough doctor could do this owl-hoot any good. That pet snake of yours got him in the main wrist artery. He'll never regain conciousness. I thought you were afraid of snakes, Sam."

"By grannies, I am," ejaculated the old man, looking fearfully around. "But I wuz more skeered of that Montanny gal of yourn, gettin' left in the lurch, with old Sam to blame for it. I like to died gettin' the rattles off that slimy reptile and keepin' him in thet box."

Steve Spence looked up at the kindly old miner—there was deep feeling in his eyes. He hoped the old codger would never know of his unfounded suspicions of him.

"And they said I was a fool," Sam Knobbs said as he gazed around the clearing at the downed men. "We'll give the two of them a decent burial, even if they was skunks. The other gent we'll take in to Sacramento as a witness to what happened.

"You'll be writing that letter to Montanny in a couple days, son. Yore half of the yeller metal'ull pay her fare down and the preacher, too."

"Yeah," said Steve, his mind far away with Rose. "And we'll call our mine the Blue Rose."

"By cracky, that'll be fine!" said Sam Knobbs.

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THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 10)

Their leader was Ewen Cameron, a tall Scotchman, tough as the knot of a Texas jackpine; and these first cowboys made history—as you will read in THE FIRST COWBOY, by FREDERICK R. BECHDOLT, next issue!

Hopewell Drinks a Dry Toast

And for the raisins in the pudding we have a story of Sheriff Boo Boo Bounce and his hopeless deputy, Hopewell. For those of you who know the pair, "No comment is needed," as the feller said when he backed out of the bee tree. For those who haven't had the misfortune to make their acquaintance, Boo Boo Bounce and Hopewell are the short and the long of the law of Coyote County with their headquarters in the town of Polecat. Boo Boo is fat as a hog on corn, and Hopewell is so thin he has to stand twice in the same place to make a shadow—and a more lawless pair of lawmen never saw stars—which they frequently do.

VACATION AND NO MISTAKE is the title their creator, Ben Frank has tacked onto his contribution for next GIANT WESTERN.

C-o-o-o-o-m-e an' get it 'fore we throw it out!

The Mail Pouch

LIFE for an editor would be very simple if he had to find stories only for one hypothetical human being with unvarying tastes. But he must find stories for many people of many temperaments, of different ages, and of different experience, and for each of these in a wide variety of moods. Some like a rapid action story of quick-triggering gunmen. Some like the light touch and the pithy epigram, others go for slapstick. One reader hollers for more love and the next for more action. One critic will be a stickler for accuracy in detail, another for reality of characterization and convincing human reactions.

Occasionally we are able to get a story that has something to say to practically everybody. Such apparently was the long complete novel in the last issue of GIANT WESTERN. Here is one of the many interesting letters about it.

Want to compliment you on your story in the last issue of GIANT WESTERN, WATER, GRASS AND GUNSMOKE by L. P. Holmes. It is one of the best stories from a literary point of view that you have published. To illustrate, may I quote the following excerpt from page fourteen:

"The heart of the range, that lake, the foundation upon which Rudd had built all the rest. With it he was a king. Without it, a pauper. He had liked to ride around it, watching Hat cows filing down the trails to drink, or graze across the grassy meadows. He had liked to linger by the tules along the shore, where the ruby-winged blackbirds spread their trilling like a thousand silver bells. Where the beaches ran sandy he would listen to the haunting plaintiveness of the killdeer crying. And in the fall when the wild fowl spread curved wings against the sky, he would spend hours, watching."—*L. L. Clarke, Olathe, Kansas.*

We can assure the writer of the following letter that he is in good company in his appreciation of W. C. Tuttle. Mr. Tuttle has been prime Western readin' for discriminating fiction fans for a long time. The son of a Montana Sheriff of pioneer days, he has never been far from the cow-country that he loves, and his characters and settings are as real as a rope burn.

Thanks for THE MARK OF CAIN by W. C. Tuttle. I'm a young cowhand, raised all my life on a ranch, and I want to rear up on my hindlegs and tell a man that THE MARK OF CAIN is one of the best and most exciting and true to life Western stories I've ever read. I don't have a lot of time for reading, but you can bet the last cow in your old man's herd I'm going to have the newsstand save me a copy of GIANT WESTERN every issue till I can get to town and pick it up. If he doesn't I'll pull my sudden-six and salivate him proper.—*Bill Judd, Lodge Grass, Montana.*

We wish that we could sit around a roundup campfire with our readers and have a good augurin' match about just what it is they like the most or dislike the most in a Western story. With everybody peaceful after a good chuckwagon meal of beans, bacon, sourdough biscuits and blackstrap molasses, and hot strong coffee, I'll bet some interestin' talk could be had.

Next best thing is to have our augurin' match right here in the back of GIANT WESTERN. So let's go, you readin' rannihans. Skin out a few criticisms and shoot 'em out to the old GW spread.

Thanks, everybody, and so long for now.

—THE RAMROD.

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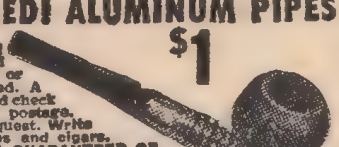

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The Fastest THING ON LEGS

Yes, Sir—It's the Antelope!

by JOHN BLACK

THE story is told of a G.I. who was bouncing merrily along in a jeep somewhere on the Western plains, when a pronghorn antelope danced out of the sage and pranced on down the road ahead of him.

The G.I. gave the jeep the gun and sailed forward at 30 miles an hour. The space between him and the antelope grew wider. He trod on the accelerator and his speedometer crept up to 40, then 50, then 55, with the driver hanging on to the steering wheel for dear life as the jeep made flying leaps from one rock to another. And the antelope kept pulling away from him!

In desperation, the driver brought it up to 60 miles an hour and here for the first time he held his own, neither gaining nor losing on the flying animal ahead. But the bumps were too much for him; he had to quit and let the race go by default.

Sixty miles an hour makes the antelope about the fastest thing on the American continent and very close to the fastest creature on legs. The African cheetah, a spotted cat like the leopard, has been clocked by Martin Johnson at 70 miles an hour, but this for only very short distances. For short sprints the African lion can reach 55, and the plain ordinary common house cat can do 50 without much trouble. But none of them can keep it up like the antelope.

Man's best friend, the horse, is not good for much over 35 miles an hour, which is about the speed of a moose, or likely the American bison, though accurate timing methods were not available in the days when the big bison stampedes were common. The fastest time made by a horse was 42.3 miles

an hour, done by a four-year-old race horse named Bob Wade, in 1890.

Much is heard of the speed of greyhounds and whippets, but a whippet's time is not much better than 34 miles an hour. An ordinary dog can do about 20 miles an hour.

And if you have heard much about the speed of a jack rabbit, prepare for a surprise. A jack rabbit bounces along at 20 to 22 miles per hour, which is just about the speed of a running man. That is—at least one man, for the track star Jesse Owens has been timed in the 100 yard dash at 9.4 seconds, which is 21.7 miles an hour.

So a man could hold his own with a rabbit, but if he were trying to beat a bear to a tree he might have some trouble, for an ordinary black bear will roll along over the ground at 25 miles an hour.

The coyote, who drifts along effortlessly, clocks in at 30, enough to catch a rabbit, but not to outrun a horse or a greyhound. And a bull elk, which is a long-legged animal like the moose, can only get up to about 28 miles an hour, which leads to the guess that the bison, or buffalo, was somewhat slower.

If you want some more comparisons, the common red fox can get up a sprint of 45 miles an hour, which is more than enough to overhaul a fleeing porker at 11 miles an hour, or a frightened chicken dashing away at 9 miles an hour, or a blacksnake wriggling through the grass at 3.

Wanta race?

Answers to Questions on Page 113

1. The Pony Express lasted eighteen months beginning April 3rd, 1860.

2. Reputedly the most valuable quartz nugget was found at the Carson Angel Mine in Calaveras County in 1854. It weighed 2340 ounces, and was worth at that time $43,534.

3. The famous McCanless fight which took place at the Rock Creek stage station in Jefferson County, Missouri, in 1861, has been the subject of all sorts of distortion and rumor by which Wild Bill is reported to have killed anywhere up to fifteen men. The actual tally of men killed by Hickok was three.

4. The "bullwhip" used by the old-time bullwhackers had a wooden handle usually three feet or under in length. The lash swelled gradually for about six feet out from the handle to the belly. From the belly, the lash tapered gradually to within a foot of the end of the twenty-foot length, where it terminated in a ribbon-shaped thong.

5. The Dragoon Colt was made for the U. S. Dragoons in 1848 and 1850. It was a .44 caliber weapon with a seven and a half inch barrel. A stock was made for it so that it could be used as a shoulder gun if desired.

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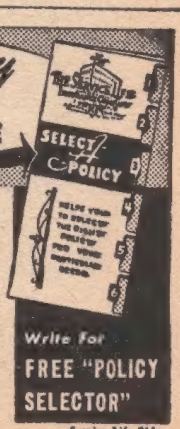

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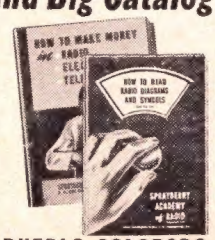

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